A STRIKING CONTRAST





To Lallie,

from Louis.

26th October 1901,

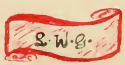


Not the Gift

of the Lover, but

the Love of the

Giver.





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A

STRIKING CONTRAST

BY

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AUTHOR OF "LITTLE MERRY-FACE AND HIS CROWN OF CONTENT"
"THE MISER OF KINGSCOURT," "KATHLEEN MAVOURNEEN"
ETC. ETC.

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A STRIKING CONTRAST

CHAPTER I

SYLVIA'S HOME

THE evening sun was setting; the wide prairies, with their herds of cattle, the paddocks, and the peaks of the distant mountains, were bathed in its gold-red light.

In the verandah of a small house in the Australian Bush sat a young man of five or six-and-twenty. He was tall and strongly built. His shoulders were broad; his limbs long and muscular. He was not handsome; but he was a gentleman; and there was something very attractive in the earnest glance of his dark eyes, and the kindly expression of his sunburnt face.

At his knee, her rosy mouth wreathed with happy smiles, her little fat hands clasping his, stood a baby girl with fair curling hair, and skin of lily whiteness. The young man looked at her with much affection, and pressed his lips to her chubby cheeks.

"My darling!" he said; "it is nearly time for my sweet Sylvia to go to bed."

The child pulled at his watch-chain, and stamped her little foot.

"No, no!" she cried.

"Yes, yes. It is late. The calves and chickens are all in bed, and Sylvia must go too."

But baby frowned.

"No, no; fo', fo'," she said imploringly. "Me want fo', fo'."

"Then off you go," he answered, laughing. "Go and gather some flowers if you like. I am too lazy to stir. Run along and bring some to papa."

Sylvia dropped the chain, and with a crow of delight toddled to the other side of the verandah, where the morning glories twined their graceful stems round the battered posts. Raising herself on tiptoe, she tried to reach the pretty blossoms. But they grew too high; and as she stretched above her head, she lost her balance and rolled over on the floor. She uttered a loud cry, and big tears hopped down her cheeks.

"Poor little mite, you have indeed fallen low," cried her father, rushing forward and catching her in his arms. "But you must be plucky, dear, and not cry so easily. See, papa will give you the flowers. So dry your eyes, my pet."

He gathered a few glories, and placed them in her hands.

"Papa dea, papa dea, oh, oo dea," whispered Sylvia softly; and, nestling up to him, she kissed and patted

his face. He pressed her lovingly to his breast, and warmly returned her caress.

"My little girl must be brave. It is not good to cry so easily."

The child smiled through her tears.

"Me dood now, wery dood."

"That is right. And now, my pet really must go to bed. Anne!" A door opened, and a neat-looking young woman entered the verandah.

"Yes, sir. Shall I take Miss Sylvia?" she asked. "It is past her usual bedtime."

"Yes, take her, please. She is tired and sleepy. And when she is in bed, Anne, I should like to speak to you. I have something important to ask you."

"Very well, sir. Come, Miss Sylvia."

The child sprang into her arms, laughing and crowing with delight.

"Night, night, papa," she cried, shaking her little hand. "Night, night."

Her father kissed her again. "Good-night, darling; and go to sleep quickly, for I want nurse."

"I'll be back very soon, sir," replied Anne. "She's never long about going to sleep."

As the baby disappeared, and the last sound of her merry prattle died away, the young man sighed heavily, and flung himself down upon a chair.

"Poor darling! it will be hard to part with her. She grows more engaging, more winning, every day. It will be a sad trial to send her away. But it must be done—it must be done."

He sighed again. His head sank upon his breast, and he became lost in thought.

George Atherstone was the only son of an English baronet, and heir to a fine old place and a considerable amount of property in Lancashire. But, unfortunately, the Atherstones had been fast-living, extravagant people, and when George's father succeeded to the title and estates, he found the latter heavily mortgaged, and yielding an income upon which it was impossible to live in anything like the style befitting his rank. For himself, he was not ambitious; but he was anxious that his son should one day pay off all debts, and take his place amongst the well-to-do. By going into trade he believed he might accomplish this, and when George left college, he told him his plans, and implored him to enter a merchant's office. But the young man would not listen to his prayers. He was not anxious to make money. He could not bear the drudgery of the city. His tastes did not lie that way. He loved a free, roving life, and longed to see the world. His father was bitterly disappointed, and begged him to consider the matter well. But George was firm. So, finding him bent on following his own will, Sir Eustace gave him what money he could spare, and allowed him to go where he would. The sum was not large, but with it the young man was well pleased, and certain of turning it to good account in the distant land to which he was going. So he thanked his father warmly, said good-bye to his mother and friends, and sailed for Australia.

On board ship he met Sylvia Kenyon, daughter of an Australian settler. She was just eighteen, with pale gold hair, a delicate complexion, and soft, appealing blue eyes. She was an interesting companion, a sympathetic friend; and in a few days George Atherstone grew to love her very dearly. Sylvia soon returned his affection with all the ardour of her fresh young nature; and they became engaged. The marriage was solemnised some six weeks later at Melbourne, and the happy couple started at once for the Bush.

The home to which George Atherstone carried his bride was pretty enough in its way, but lonely, and isolated from other habitations. The house was old, and had been patched and repaired on all sides. The roof was covered with sheets of bark, held down by large wooden girders. A huge vine spread its leafy branches over the walls, tenderly covering their nakedness and defects. A wide verandah ran along the whole front of the dwelling, and was thickly grown with gorgeous creepers. Below this was a flower garden, its beds bright with many flowers. A row of broad-leaved tropical plants surrounded the little enclosure, where some of the trees had been felled and stumped, whilst others had been spared for shade and effect. Then, beyond, as far as the eye could see, were vast prairies, with herds of cattle grazing quietly, or lying camped under the trees; and a beautiful chain of blue-peaked mountains stretching away in the distance.

Within the house there was but a small supply of anything like luxury. The walls were covered with illustrations from pictorial papers. The furniture was scanty, and of the poorest description. But when Sylvia hung up the white mosquito curtains, and spread about the many dainty objects she had brought with her from England; when she filled her bowls with flowers, and the corners of her rooms with plants and ferns, the place improved rapidly, and very soon assumed a comfortable and homely aspect.

The first year of their married life passed quickly by. And in spite of many privations, and enforced isolation from their friends, the young people were extremely happy. George was hard-working and industrious. Sylvia had plenty of occupation, delighted in her house, and felt proud of her big, kind husband. The free country life suited them both; they cared nothing for society, and had little to trouble or annoy them.

But all too soon there came a change. Sylvia grew delicate. She longed for a female friend; and as George was obliged to leave her by herself for hours together, while he looked after his sheep, or rode over his farm, she became lonely and discontented.

Then young Atherstone and a neighbouring selecter quarrelled about a piece of land that the latter wished to seize and make his own. George was furious; but as he had no money to buy the field, he was obliged to let it go. This incident caused much annoyance and irritation, and peace seemed banished from the

homestead. Then baby Sylvia was born; and for a time Atherstone forgot all outside worries in the joy of possessing his little daughter. The happy mother was no longer lonely, and soon grew strong again. The quarrelsome selecter became friendly, and offered to give back the land at a moderate price. This pleased George, and he wrote home for money. The man promised to wait; and everything looked bright once more, when suddenly the young wife caught a fever, and after a short illness expired in her husband's arms. George was wild with grief, and for some time could not bear to look upon his child. But by degrees his heart warmed to the little creature; and he soon came to love her with tenderness and devotion.

George Atherstone had, as we know, gone to Australia much against his father's will; and every mail brought letters imploring him to return. But the young man was obstinate. The life in the Bush suited him best. He was happy, so was his wife. He would not go back to England. But after Sylvia's death everything was changed. The little house felt lonely. His home was not what it had been; and he was strongly tempted to leave it all, and set sail for Europe. The temptation, however, did not last long. The idea of settling down to a humdrum life in London or Lancashire was most distasteful to him; and he soon dismissed it from his mind. He would take change of air and scene in Australia. So there and then, he resolved to leave his present abode, and travel farther into the country.

Then came another letter from his father.

"I am growing old, George," he wrote. "My wife, my children, are all dead—but you. Come home, my son—come home. I am rich now. My money troubles are at an end. I told you in my last letter that there was question of running a railway through the estate, at the bottom of the home park. This has been done, and the compensation given by the company is so large that I have been able to pay off all debts and mortgages. Then the railway coming so close has enhanced the value of my property. I have built new houses, for which I receive high rents promptly paid. So, my son, I wish you to come home. You may now live as you please—go where you choose. Society, the best London can supply, will receive you with open arms, and your father will welcome you gladly. For wealth has not brought the happiness I expected. All my dear ones are gone. I long for something, some child of my own to love. And yet, from what you have written me so often, I fear even this will not tempt you from your life of freedom. Therefore I pray you—I implore—if you cannot, will not come yourself, send me your child. The Australian Bush is not a fitting place for a tender girl, the daughter of a family like ours. So if you cannot yet bear the trammels of civilisation, if you still prefer a roving existence to your home, send little Sylvia to comfort and console me."

When he first read this, George was indignant. "Part with my child? No, never—that I could not

do. Let her grow up without knowing me—without loving me?—I could not—I could not. And to go home is impossible. I could not endure life in England.

"Society! Bah! it would stifle me. I shall stay as I am. The freedom here suits me to perfection. For many years yet, Europe shall not see me, or Sylvia."

But when he thought of his lonely father, of his anxiety to have some one to love and comfort him in his old age; when he considered the difficulties of his own position, the many dangers he might encounter in the wilder regions of the Bush, he resolved to grant the latter part of the old man's request, and send his daughter home.

"I cannot do better after all," he reflected. "My darling will be safe, well taken care of. Her presence will make up for my absence; her affection atone for my neglect. Next year, perhaps, if all goes well, I may take a run over to London to see her."

Accordingly, a letter was written and despatched to Sir Eustace Atherstone, announcing his granddaughter's speedy arrival.

But after this, things went on as before. George put off the evil hour, and lingered on amongst the flowers, his little one at his knee. The thought of parting with her was anguish, and he kept it away from him as long as possible.

At last, he heard of an exploring party going far into the country, and he grew feverishly anxious to join it. Before he could do so, however, it was necessary to place his child in safe keeping. He

could not take her with him, nor could he leave her alone in the Bush. He decided, therefore, to send her without further delay to England. But who was to take her? He had so few friends. He knew of no one going to Europe. What was to be done? Here was a dilemma that had not occurred to him before. And as poor little Sylvia fell in trying to reach the morning glories, he suddenly realised what a helpless atom she was.

"If Anne would go with her, all would be well," he said, as he gazed out over the thick short couch grass, green with summer thunderstorms. "I have watched her well, as she sat there, hour after hour, with my darling in her lap, or played with her round the verandah, and she has always seemed kind, watchful, and trustworthy. My dear wife loved her. Sylvia adores her. I feel I might trust her — if only she would go. But she may have friends who will refuse to part with her. She may"—

"You wished to speak to me, sir. Baby is asleep, so I came at once."

George looked up at the speaker, and gravely noted every point of her form and face. The survey pleased him. She was exactly what he thought: strong and well-built, neither too old nor too young. She had a fresh, wholesome complexion, a kindly smile, and an affectionate, motherly expression. "She will do, I think; and if she will only consent to go, I may safely trust my darling to her care," flashed quickly through his mind, as he bade the woman sit down.

"Anne," he said gently, "you are very fond of little Sylvia, I believe?"

Anne's colour deepened; her eyes grew bright.

"Fond of her? I love her as if she was my own, Mr. Atherstone. I loved her sweet mother, and on her deathbed she gave her to me, saying, 'Anne, you have been a faithful servant, be true to my child; never leave her—take care of her and love her.' I vowed to do it, and do it I will as long as I live."

George looked at her gratefully. "Thank you. You are a good woman, and—and—your words, your manner, encourage me to ask you a favour."

"A favour? Oh, sir, it is granted before you ask it. There is nothing I would not do for you and Miss Sylvia."

"Then will you be ready to undertake a long journey to please me? Will you leave your friends in Australia, and go to England by the next steamer from Melbourne?"

Anne startled and turned pale.

"To England? Oh, Mr. Atherstone, that is a long, long way; and what would my little pet do without me?"

"I do not mean you to go alone. Sylvia shall go with you."

"Sylvia go with me? Would you—oh, sir, would you part with your child?"

"Yes, Anne, I must. But only for a time. My father is lonely, and implores me to send her to him. I am going away from here—far up country—and I cannot take baby with me. So I have resolved to

send her home. Will you go with her? If you do, your wages shall be doubled. I will bind my father to keep you with my child, always. No matter what turns up, he must not part with you or dismiss you from his service. Will these conditions suit you? Will you take charge of Baby Sylvia?"

Anne turned her head aside. Tears gathered in her eyes, and her lips trembled with emotion.

"My dear master," she stammered presently, "you are too good. Even if I did not love the child as dearly as I do, I would feel bound to accept your generous offer, for I have a sick mother dependent on me for her entire support, and I am anxious to earn all the money I can."

"Then you will take my child to England?"

"Indeed, I will. When and how you please. And believe me, sir, my whole life and strength will be devoted to her, not because of your generosity, but because I love her, the treasure confided to me by my dying mistress."

George grasped her hand and shook it warmly.

"Thank you, Anne—thank you. You are indeed a good and faithful servant."

"I trust I am, sir," she said earnestly. "And if ever I seem to fail in my duty to you or your child, it will not be my fault. I shall never do so of my own free will."

"I believe you. I have full confidence in you."

"Thank you, sir."

And Anne curtseyed and withdrew.

CHAPTER II

SYLVIA'S ESCORT

On a hot summer day, about a week later, George Atherstone strolled leisurely down Bourke Street. He, Baby Sylvia, and Anne, the faithful nurse, had arrived in Melbourne the evening before.

Atherstone had not visited the metropolis of Victoria since the happy day of his marriage; and he felt sad and lonely as he wended his way through the busy streets, and recognised the various points of interest, that he had seen for the first time, in company with his beloved Sylvia. He gazed at the imposing piles of masonry, churches, institutes, and warehouses, and wondered at the groups of humble little shops devoted to the sale of fruit, toys, and sugar-plums, that intervene, and are all that remain of the early shanty days of Melbourne. He admired the lofty dome of Messrs. Goldsborough and Co.'s wool palace, and then thought joyfully that very soon he should leave all this glare and magnificence, this push and bustle, to return to the delightful solitude of the Bush.

As he turned down Collins Street on his way to his hotel, he heard a quick step close behind, and someone

called him by his name. He looked round in surprise; for in all this busy crowd he did not expect to meet a single acquaintance.

An elderly man with a careworn face, thin and shrunken in form and figure, approached him eagerly, and held out his hand.

"My dear Atherstone, I am glad to see you. You look remarkably well."

"Neil! Can it really be you?"

"Yes, I do not wonder at your not knowing me. I am much changed, Atherstone."

"Changed! I should just think you were. What have you been doing to yourself?"

"Nothing. But the fates have been against me. Everything has gone wrong with me. I have sold my house and land, and am going back to England."

"Is that wise?"

"I am not sure that it is. But my wife is eager to go."

"Your wife—is she in Melbourne?"

"Yes. She and my two children are at a small hotel just out of Bourke Street. We sail for England to-morrow."

"My dear Neil," cried George, "I am glad. I was longing to meet a friend going in the *Cimbria*."

"Are you coming, then?"

"No. I do not care to return to Europe at present. But I am sending my little girl home to my father."

"My poor fellow, have you then lost your pretty wife?"

"Yes, she is dead. My darling died last year;" and his voice grew low and husky. "She is a terrible loss to me and the little one."

"I am sure of it. I feel for you extremely," said Neil; "and if there is anything that my wife and I can do, pray tell us, and we shall be delighted to do it."

"Thank you, you are very kind. There is not much to be done. But if Mrs. Neil would look after baby a little"—

"My dear fellow, of course she will, with the greatest pleasure. What sort of person is your nurse?"

"A most estimable person, and I can trust her thoroughly. But it would be a great happiness for me to know, that during the voyage my darling had a lady to be kind to her, and little friends to play with."

"Of course; and we shall take splendid care of her. My Madge is like a second mother to her small sister Dora. She will be the same to your child. How old is she?"

"Two years and a month or so."

"Just Dora's age. They'll be companions for each other,"

George laughed.

"They'll probably pull each other's hair. Is Madge much older?"

"Oh yes; Madge is twelve. The wisest little woman in the world! Her mother would trust her over the whole universe with little Dora. Come along and see them. My wife will be pleased to have a talk with you. But she'll be deeply grieved to hear

of Mrs. Atherstone's death. Dear me! She was a winsome creature. Well, well, my dear fellow," continued Mr. Neil, sighing, "there are many things worse than death. It has been a trial, a great trial, to you to lose your darling wife. But believe me, I have suffered terribly in seeing mine, the beautiful girl I loved, grow thin and pale, lose her health and spirits, and all because of my misfortunes and bad luck."

George grasped his hand and shook it warmly.

"I am sorry you had so much trouble, very sorry. But I trust you may do better in England. I'll give you a letter to my father. For my sake he will find something for you to do. He is in want of an agent, I know, and he will surely give you a trial at my request. It is a good post, and would suit you admirably."

"God bless you, Atherstone! Your words fill me with hope. It was a wonderful chance my meeting you to-day."

"It was. But a still greater that you should be going home in the same steamer as my Sylvia. Your fate is in her hands. She will plead for you with her grandfather. Kindness to her will be a powerful passport to his favour."

"Then my life will be a brighter one than I ever hoped for; for there is nothing that can be done for your child that I shall not do. But here we are at our hotel. I hope you don't object to stairs, for we have to mount a good many. I'll lead the way."

The staircase was narrow and steep; and the room into which the two gentlemen walked unannounced,

was small and dark. The blinds were drawn down to keep out the sun, and so close was the day, that the white mosquito curtains were undisturbed by the breeze, although all the windows were wide open. Trunks of every shape and size were ranged round the walls, and the chairs and sofas were strewn with garments large and small. There was no one visible. But suddenly, from behind a tall screen, there rose the sweet, fresh voice of a child, singing a pretty lullaby—

"Oh, hush thee, my baby!
Thy sire was a knight,
Thy mother a lady,
Both gentle and bright."

"There, that's my Madge," whispered Mr. Neil. "Just peep round, and see how she is taking care of her sister."

George did as desired, and was charmed with the picture that he saw before him.

On a low seat, her long, well-shaped legs and neatly shod feet stretched out before her on the floor, sat Madge. She wore a white cotton frock, with short sleeves and low neck. Her brown hair, which was thick and wavy, was tossed back from her face without comb or ribbon to confine it, and hung loosely over her shoulders. On her knee, her eyes closed, but her lips smiling, lay a beautiful child of about two years old.

"Go to sleep, darling; my Dora must go to sleep," cried Madge, interrupting her song to remonstrate with little wideawake. "Poor Sissy has work to do. So you must go to sleep."

The baby laughed and pulled her sister's hair. Madge hugged her to her breast and covered her with kisses.

"You see," said Mr. Neil, "Madge has the temper of an angel. No matter how that child torments her, she is always kind. She has a heart of gold, and a wise little head of her own."

Before George had time to answer, the baby caught sight of her father, and, struggling off her sister's knee, ran forward to meet him.

"Naughty Dora, not to go to sleep," he cried, tossing her in the air. "Madge ought to whip you."

Madge gave a groan of horror, and sprang to her feet.

"Oh, father, what an idea! I wouldn't touch the darling for the world."

"I should think not," he answered gaily. "I know you love our pet too dearly for that. But you must not spoil her."

"You are more likely to do that, father," said Madge gravely.

"Perhaps so. But it would not be wonderful if we all spoiled her. Isn't she a beauty, Atherstone?"

"She certainly is," said George warmly. "I don't think I ever saw such a pretty child."

"What? Not even your own?"

"Not even my own. Sylvia is fair and dainty-looking. . But this child is a beautiful little creature."

"So she is," cried the delighted father; "and we are all very proud of her. Aren't we, Madge?"

"I am quite sure you are," said Atherstone; "and I

hear you are a first-rate little mother in your way, Miss Madge. Now my poor baby is going to England in the same steamer with you. Will you be good to her? She is a lonely bairn, and will have neither father nor mother to look after her."

Madge raised her large grey eyes to his face, and, looking at him earnestly, said—

"I will be kind to her. She shall be another little sister. But are you not afraid to send her away from you?"

"Afraid? Oh no. There is nothing to fear."

"Now, Madge, don't make us nervous," cried her father. "The fact is, Atherstone, with all her wisdom, my little girl is a bit of a coward. She hates the sea."

Madge shivered slightly.

"I don't like long journeys," she said. "And I don't want to go to England. I like Australia best."

"So do I," answered George. "But I suppose your father has good reasons for going."

The child clasped her hands tightly together; and as Mr. Neil moved away to the window with Dora, she whispered sadly—

"He thinks he'll get work to do, and earn money there. But he'll never get it, poor father—never. Here comes my mother. So, hush! not a word to alarm her." And, putting her finger to her lip, she went after Dora, took her in her arms, and carried her out of the room.

"What a strange child!" thought George. "She's certainly old beyond her years. And as her father

says, she might safely be trusted to take care of her baby sister. She is kind and gentle, and seems wonderfully grave and sedate."

"Atherstone, here is my wife," said Neil in a low voice. "You will find her much changed. But do not pretend to notice it."

George bowed his head to show that he understood, and went forward to meet Mrs. Neil. He looked at her smilingly; but as he put his hand in hers, he could scarcely conceal the sorrow he felt, at the terrible change that had taken place in her since he had last seen her, four years before. Could this wan, thin creature be the fine, buxom woman, who had been the life and soul of the company on board ship? Could this nervous, shrinking lady, be the dashing, merry Mrs. Neil, who had chaperoned his Sylvia, smoothed away all difficulties, and hastened his marriage?

"We have had many troubles, Mr. Atherstone," she said, and her voice trembled as she spoke. "I daresay my husband has told you."

"Yes. But there is a good time coming," cried George eagerly, "when you reach England."

"Ah! If we ever do."

"My dear lady," George laughed nervously, "pray do not suggest such a thing. No wonder the child is frightened at the idea of the long journey," he thought. "With such a mother, good heavens! it is not extraordinary she should be prematurely old."

"I suggest nothing," said Mrs. Neil slowly. "I long to be off—to leave this hated country. I have

known constant grinding sorrow and anxiety ever since my return to it, the year you were married. But you, too, have been in trouble. I hear your sweet young wife is dead. Why was she taken, I wonder, whilst I, a useless, worthless invalid, have been left as a burden to my poor unfortunate husband?"

"Kate!" cried Neil reproachfully; "my darling, do not talk so! Weak and delicate as you are, you have been my comfort."

"No, no, John; you would have been far better without me. I have but increased your troubles."

"Kate, Kate, I know not what to say to you." And, wringing his hands, the poor husband turned away.

"You have a child, Mr. Atherstone," she remarked presently. "And she is coming with us to England. You look surprised. But I was in the adjoining room; the folding doors are slightly open, and I heard all you said to Madge. Why are you sending her home?"

"To comfort my father, who is lonely."

"Quite right. He has grown rich, I hear. She will be his heiress."

"I never thought of that," said George, smiling. "But I suppose I, his son, will come first. Sylvia will surely come after me."

"First or second, it matters little," she answered gloomily. "She will be rich—an heiress—a somebody, whilst my darling, my beautiful Dorothy, will be a pauper. Ah, Mr. Atherstone, what a contrast will be their lot in life! A striking, a cruel contrast."

"Riches do not always mean happiness, Mrs. Neil.

My Sylvia will have money; but your Dora will have a mother to love and cherish her."

"Alas, my life is uncertain—a mere question of time, Mr. Atherstone. My heart"—

"Mamma dear, you have talked enough; Mr. Atherstone will excuse you. You must come and rest now." And little twelve-year-old Madge laid her hand on her mother's shoulder, and looked as though she meant to be obeyed.

"Yes, dearest, I am coming," said Mrs. Neil meekly. "Mr. Atherstone, this child is my greatest comfort. And should anything happen to me on this voyage, she will look after your little one, and"—

"Mother, mother, do not talk so wildly."

"It is not wild, dear. It's only—only— But good-bye till to-morrow, my friend. I am tired, I must rest."

And, leaning on her daughter's arm, she went from the room.

George gazed after them, with eyes full of compassion.

"Is it not sad to see her thus?" asked Neil in broken accents. "She who was once so strong and full of life!"

"It is, it is," cried George. "But do not fret, my poor friend. I am sure this sea journey will restore her, make her all right."

"I hope so, I trust so. This journey must and will do her good. It will give us all new life, please God, and end our troubles."

CHAPTER III

ON BOARD THE "CIMBRIA"

When, early next day, George Atherstone stepped on board the *Cimbria*, with his little daughter in his arms, he found that Mr. Neil and his family were already there, and had taken possession of their cabins.

Mrs. Neil was not visible; and George rejoiced not a little at her absence, for her gloomy nervousness affected him unpleasantly. Madge and Dora were walking up and down the promenade deck, watching with much interest all that was going on. When Madge saw Atherstone and his child, she smiled, and, taking her sister's hand, went to meet him.

"Dora," she said, "here is a friend for you, a dear little girl to play with."

She took Sylvia from her father, kissed her tenderly, and put her down beside Dora.

The two children stared at each other for a moment, then Sylvia ran forward, put her rosy lips to Dora's, and stroked her curling hair.

"Oh, you dea!" she cried. "You pitty dea!"

"Sylvia has an eye for beauty," said George, smiling. "I think they will be friends."

"Yes, I am sure they will," said Madge. "Sylvia looks a sweet little creature, and Dora, though rather passionate, is a loving, affectionate child."

"I am sure she is, and you are kindness itself. Anne," he said, turning to the nurse, who stood behind him, armed with packages and wraps, "this is Miss Madge Neil. Her father is an old friend of mine; and I wish baby to be with her and her sister as much as possible."

"Very well, sir," replied Anne, whose eyes were red with much weeping. "It will be pleasant for me to have friends of yours on board."

"And it will be nice for me to have you," said Madge, with a frank smile. "Mother is an invalid, and will be almost always in her berth."

"That is sad for you. But I trust she will soon grow stronger," said George kindly. "I hope nurse and baby may have a cabin near yours."

"They are next to us," she replied. "Will you leave Sylvia with me, and take Anne down to see where she is? She had better get the berths ready and arrange all her parcels before we start."

"Wise little woman, your advice is excellent. But I think I'll take my darling with me. Our moments together are precious now. Come, Anne."

Then, lifting Baby Sylvia, he hugged her to his breast, and carried her downstairs.

"And now, Anne," he said, when he had made all possible arrangements for his child's comfort, "take care of my darling. Watch her night and day, and see that she wants for nothing."

"Trust me, sir," answered Anne, with emotion. "I will do my duty. Your child will be more precious to me than my own life. I'll watch over her well."

"I believe you will. And now, I think, you have all you require?"

"Yes, sir. Everything."

"Very well. And here is a letter for my father, with his address in full, lest by any chance he should be prevented meeting you. I have telegraphed and written, but in case of accident it is well to have this with you. And here," taking a locket and chain from his neck, "is a portrait of my dear wife. See, I will put it on Sylvia. Show it to my father, that he may know what my darling was like. But let the child wear it always."

"Yes, sir. And I'll teach her to love her mother's memory."

"Do. And may God bless you!"

A bell was heard above. Mr. Neil rushed to the cabin door.

"Atherstone, you have barely time to get away. We are just off. Come along."

"God bless and protect you, my pet!" cried George in broken accents. "Good-bye, my dear little Sylvia, my sweet child. Talk to her of me, Anne. Do not let her forget me."

He pressed the little one to his heart once more, kissed her over and over again, then, rushing upstairs, said a hasty good-bye to Mr. Neil and Madge, and hurried on shore.

The gangway was withdrawn, the anchor raised, the ropes pulled in, and the goodship *Cimbria* steamed out of the harbour.

The next few days were passed in the usual fashion on board ship. The wind was high; the steamer pitched and rolled, and almost all the passengers were laid low. The decks were forsaken—the dining-room but little frequented. After a time, things looked brighter. The wind went down; the sun shone pleasantly; and the handsome saloons and comfortable seats on deck were filled with a gay company, anxious to enjoy life, and make their days on board the *Cimbria* pass as quickly as possible.

One of the first to come forth from the seclusion of her cabin was Madge Neil. She had suffered much, and longed for a breath of fresh air. In the passage she met her father.

"Well, my dear? I am glad to see you," he cried, kissing her tenderly. "These have been miserable days. How is your mother? And my sweet Dora, how does she seem?"

"Mother and Dora are both much better, papa. They are asleep. Will you take me for a walk?"

"Certainly, dear. Come along."

He drew his daughter's arm within his own; and they went up on deck together.

About an hour later, Anne, looking as white as a ghost, came up the stairs, carrying Sylvia on one arm and Dora on the other.

Madge flew to her side in an instant.

"How good of you to think of Dora, Anne! I thought she was asleep."

"Children don't sleep for ever, any more than big people, Miss Madge," she answered pettishly.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" began Madge.

"You need not be. It was no trouble to bring her up, poor lamb. Perhaps the sea-breezes may do her and Miss Sylvia good. They've brought a fine colour to your cheeks."

"Yes, haven't they?" cried Madge, kissing her baby sister. "I don't think I ever felt so well in my life. I positively love the sea to-day."

"Well, well, I can't say as I do," replied Anne dolefully. "And, oh dear, England's a terrible way off."

"Of course it is. Why, we have weeks and weeks before us yet."

"Dear, dear! How shall we ever get through it all? I wish I'd never left Australia."

Madge laughed merrily, and began to dance the little girls about on her knee. "Poor Anne! but you'll soon change, I am sure. Why, look at me! When I started, I was in such bad spirits. I hated going to England. I was afraid of the sea. I felt that something dreadful would happen to us if we left our home to wander aimlessly over Europe. I had a perfect horror of coming on board. But now"—

"You seem greatly changed, certainly. You look bright and merry—just as if you had heard some very good news."

Madge hid her face for a moment; then uncovered it with a cry of "Here I am!" to the babies.

They laughed and crowed, and called "Dain, dain."

Their orders were obeyed; and a lively game ensued. Then the little ones grew tired, and rolled off her knee, on to the deck, where they sat blissfully content, munching a couple of hard biscuits.

"What a pretty picture they make!" said Madge. "I never saw such a pair of darlings—both so lovely, and yet such a contrast. I hope they may always be friends."

"That's not likely," replied Anne, shaking her head wisely. "Your mother says their lives will be as great a contrast as their looks. Miss Sylvia is going to a splendid home. She will be a great heiress."

"Whilst my poor Dora's family is certainly not rich; and she will never have any fortune, but her own bonnie face."

"And a right handsome one that will be. But I would not despair, Miss Madge," said Anne encouragingly. "There's many ups and downs in life. And who knows what may happen yet? Your pa's clever. He may get on better than ever he did when he goes to England."

"Yes, I am sure he will. In fact I know he will," cried the girl joyfully. "And that's the reason I looked as if I had heard good news. Because I really had."

"A very good reason too," answered Anne, smiling. "But what is the good news?"

"This. My father told it to me to-day, as we walked up and down the deck together. Mr. Atherstone is very fond of papa. He knows him to be good and clever, and he has given him a letter to his father, who is immensely rich, and has large estates, I don't exactly know where. But papa knows all about them. And Mr. Atherstone has asked him to give papa a situation of some kind there—his agent, I think."

"But will the old gentleman do so?"

"Of course he will. He would do anything for his son. So you see, even if our Dora is never an heiress, she will be quite in a position to be Sylvia's friend."

"Certainly. And if their fathers love each other, it is only natural they should, too, the pets."

"So I think. And do you wonder now, Anne, that I feel happy?"

"No, Miss Madge. And I do hope all these things may turn out as you wish."

Madge raised her clear, earnest eyes to the sky, then let them wander away over the wide surging waters of the ocean.

"Yes, Anne, I hope so. God grant they may," she said softly. "I think they will. I feel full of confidence."

"And your mother? How does she feel?"

"Mamma is always depressed. But she is better, I think. She has great faith in Mr. Atherstone."

"Which? Father or son?"

"Both. But she never saw the father, you know."

"She saw and knew my master's wife?"

"Yes. She knew her before she was married, and was at the wedding. She says Sylvia is very like her."

"Yes. She certainly is. See, this is her portrait."

And, lifting Sylvia on her knee, she showed Madge the pretty miniature that George Atherstone had placed round his child's neck.

"What a sweet, sad face!" cried Madge. "How lovely she must have been! And yet she looks as if she must have suffered greatly."

"I know nothing of her history," said Anne, releasing the struggling Sylvia from her arms. "When I knew her, she was very happy, but had a sad expression, poor dear. She was an orphan, I fancy, from what I have heard. So, unless on her father's side, Sylvia has but few relations. None, indeed, that I ever heard of."

"I'm afraid we haven't any either," said Madge, sighing. "If anything were to happen to papa and mamma, Dora and I would be utterly friendless and forlorn."

"Why, Madge, how solemn you look!" cried her father, coming up at that moment. "I left you smiling and bright. I find you"—

"Laughing and merry, papa dear," she exclaimed. "Everything looks promising for us now; so, of course, I am gay. And see, aren't those children well? They are as rosy as possible."

"They are, dear," he answered, smiling. "And even Anne looks fresher than when she came on board. Your mother, too, has improved marvellously. We shall have her quite strong before we reach England."

"Quite!" cried Madge joyfully. "A sea journey is a wonderful cure for faint hearts and tired bodies. But, papa, take Anne round and show her all the beauties of the ship."

"Very well. Come along, Anne."

"But Baby Sylvia," cried Anne. "I can't carry her about. I am too unsteady on my feet, and I don't like to leave her."

"I'll take care of the pet," said Madge. "See, we three shall have fine games together. Peep—o—Sylvia! Peep—o—Dora! Run off and practise your sea-legs, Anne."

So Anne went away to explore the ship, and Madge mounted guard over the babies.

CHAPTER IV

A TERRIBLE NIGHT

The long voyage was almost at an end. Nothing had occurred to disturb its peace and harmony. The weather had been splendid; the passengers agreeable and entertaining. And as the *Cimbria* bowled merrily through the Mediterranean, Madge was enchanted with all she saw. The glorious blue sea, the clear, cloudless sky, filled her with delight; and when they ran along the lovely shore and cast anchor in the Bay of Naples, words failed her, and she gazed across the unrivalled harbour with flushed cheeks and shining eyes.

"To-morrow we shall be in England," thought Madge one night, as she lay awake in her berth. "We have passed the Bay of Biscay, our journey is almost at an end, and some time to-morrow we shall reach our destination—England. A new country—I wonder what it is like. Shall I feel amongst strangers there? No. Why should I? I have father and mother and Dora—sweet little Dora! I shall never be lonely whilst I have all these dear ones to love. God keep them safe for me."

Then the girl raised herself on her elbow, and looked down upon her sleeping mother and sister. Mrs. Neil looked white and wan in the dim light; but Dora was the picture of health and loveliness, as she lay in profound slumber on her pillow. Madge smiled happily and sank back upon the berth. But she could not sleep. She felt restless and unsettled. Thoughts of the new country, the strange home, her father's prospects, filled her mind and kept her uneasy.

It was a clear, starry night. There was not a breath of wind, not a ripple on the water. One beautiful star twinkled brightly at Madge through the port-hole, and myriads of little ones covered the blue firmament.

But suddenly a haziness came over the atmosphere, a heavy curtain of mist fell about the ship, and the shining planets were hidden from view. "How strange!" thought Madge. "Is it a fog? Or am I getting sleepy? Perhaps a little of both. Now, I must really try to forget everything and go to sleep."

She closed her eyes, and prepared to rest. But at this moment a crash was heard,—a horrible, grinding sound,—and then the immense steamer stood still, shuddering through all its parts. Then the place echoed with cries of horror, and shriek after shriek resounded on all sides.

White with terror, Madge sprang from her berth.

"Mother," she cried, "something dreadful is going on. Get up, get up."

Mrs. Neil stared at the child. But before she could answer a word, the cabin door was flung open, and a wild, terrified voice announced the awful tidings—

"Quick—to the boats—there has been a collision—we are sinking fast."

Madge threw her ulster on over her night-dress, wrapped the now weeping Dora in a cloak, and clasped her in her arms.

"Mother," she cried in a voice of anguish, "rouse yourself—for pity's sake rouse yourself!"

But Mrs. Neil made no reply. Her white face was set, her eyes fixed and staring.

"Madge! Madge!" screamed Anne, rushing in with Sylvia. "There is not an instant to spare. See, your father will help your mother. Save yourself—come, come!"

Mr. Neil bent over his wife and kissed her lovingly, then started aside with a groan of horror.

"My darling," he murmured in a choking voice, "we can do nothing for your poor mother now. God has taken her to Himself—this shock has killed her."

"Oh, that cannot be, that cannot be! Mother, speak to me—speak!" And, sobbing bitterly, Madge flung herself upon the dead woman's breast.

"To the boats—children and women first," cried the captain. "For God's sake, be quick! Bring nothing—think only of your lives. Quick! we are sinking fast."

Mr. Neil caught Dora in his arms, and, raising the

almost unconscious Madge, bore her out of the cabin up to the deck.

There all was in wild confusion. The fog enveloped everything like a pall, and nothing could be seen at two yards' distance. The lower decks were covered with water. People were running about distracted with terror. Men and women grew delirious as they clung to the rigging, imploring the sailors to help them.

The captain alone remained calm. He never for an instant forgot his duty. The boats had all been lowered ; and by the gleam of the Bengal lights, burned by the chief engineer, he saw that they were filled as fast as possible with the unfortunate women and children.

As Madge appeared on the scene, clinging to her father's arm, she was quickly seized and flung, more dead than alive, into the nearest boat.

"Help, help!" shrieked Anne. And, relieved of his daughter's weight, Neil turned, and, taking Sylvia from her, dragged her up the stairs.

In an instant she was hurried away. There was just room for one more in a heavily laden boat, and into it she was thrown.

"The child—my master's child!" she screamed. "I cannot go without her."

Mr. Neil made a step forward, tripped on a rope, was jostled ruthlessly by the crowd, and fell on the slippery deck.

"The children—they must go in these boats,"

cried a sailor; and, catching them roughly, he flung one to Anne and the other to Madge.

"Father, father, come with us," cried Madge, as by the flare of a torch she saw poor Neil struggling to his feet. "Of what use is life to us without father or mother? Oh, come! Let him come, I pray, I implore! My father, my"—

But the sailors heeded her not, and pushed quickly off to sea. The thick fog hid the sinking ship from view; and with a shriek of anguish Madge fell fainting to the bottom of the boat.

"Thank God, we are safe!" murmured Anne, wrapping her cloak closely round the child, who clung to her in speechless terror in the other boat. "Thank God, we are saved!"

"So you may say," answered one of the men. "We were the last to leave the ship. She is gone—all on board have perished."

"Row for your lives," cried another; "dimly through the fog I see a light. It is a steamer. Row, boys! If we reach her, we are safe; if not, we must perish of cold and hunger."

The men fell to work, rowing with all the strength of their brawny arms. Fortunately the sea was comparatively smooth, or the boat would have been swamped. The men pulled for their lives, and not a word was spoken. Anne, with the baby clasped to her breast, two other women, and a boy of ten, crouched in the stern, peering anxiously for some signs of the saving ship.

For some time nothing could be seen; and imagining they had been deceived, the men hurled curse after curse at their comrade.

Then, all at once, a cry of joy went forth. Close beside them, rising like a ghost out of the fog, was a large steamer almost motionless upon the calm waters.

The shipwrecked party signalled wildly. Their signals were seen. Ropes and ladders were lowered, and men, women, and children were soon in safety on board a homeward-bound vessel.

They were all kindly treated, provided with food and clothing, and sent to bed.

Much exhausted, weak and numb with cold and terror, Anne gave the baby to the stewardess; and, begging her to attend to its wants, staggered to a berth, where she soon fell into a deep sleep.

Early next morning she awoke, and, sitting up, called loudly for the child.

"Pray do not be uneasy," said the stewardess; "she is fast asleep just beside you. See."

She raised the counterpane of the next berth, and showed a lovely infant fast asleep, with one little rounded arm thrown above her head. But the hair was a rich auburn; the long eyelashes that swept the rosy cheeks were dark; the nose was short and daintily formed; the pouting mouth was like a cupid's bow. In one word, it was not Sylvia Atherstone that lay before the distracted nurse, but little Dorothy Neil.

"There was another," gasped Anne, clutching the

woman's hands. "Another—fair—delicate. Oh, say there was another."

"Alas! no, my poor soul, there was only one. The other must have been drowned. This is the only baby brought on board last night. There were children of six, eight, and ten, but only one baby, and here she is."

"Drowned!—my pet—my Sylvia! Oh, master—master! What shall I do?"

And, wild with grief, Anne flung herself back weeping on her pillow. Hour after hour she tossed from side to side in passionate despair. What was to be done? Where could she go with this motherless, fatherless, penniless babe? She had no money, no clothes, no home. If she were to go with this little stranger to her master's father, and tell him that his grandchild was dead, what would he say? what would he do? Cast them both from his door—and then? Well, they might seek a refuge where they could—starve by the roadside, or go to the workhouse.

Then a terrible temptation took possession of the unfortunate nurse; and in her hour of extreme need, she yielded to it.

Suddenly, in the midst of her anguish, she remembered that Sir Eustace Atherstone had never seen his grand-daughter. How, then, could he know that this little girl was a stranger? How guess that she was not his son's child? How, indeed, unless he were told. And there and then Anne

resolved that for the present, at least, he should not be told.

"We touch at Plymouth directly," said the stewardess; "would you like to land?"

"Land?" cried Anne, aghast at such an idea; "without money—without friends. Oh, no, I must stay till someone comes for me."

"Then send a telegram. The news of the loss of the *Cimbria* will be, or perhaps is, known everywhere. No one will know how or where to find you, unless you telegraph that you are coming home in the *Sultana*. We shall reach Gravesend to-morrow."

Anne trembled, and became white as death.

"I feel—I—am—weak—I cannot—write."

"Poor thing, you have suffered much. But never mind. I will write it for you."

She took a pen and sat down beside Anne.

"Now, what is the address?"

"Sir Eustace Atherstone, 18 Cromwell Houses, London."

"Yes?"

"Will reach Gravesend with Miss Sylvia Atherstone to-morrow. Saved from wreck of *Cimbria*. Have no money.—Anne Dane."

"And will you not mention the other child?" asked the woman gently.

"The—other child?"

"Yes. Just a word to break the news of its drowning."

Anne started to her feet and gazed wildly round the cabin.

"Hush! There—was no other child. I—was —dreaming."

Then, with a sob and a cry, she fell fainting to the floor.

"Poor creature! the terror of this wreck has turned her brain," said the stewardess; "and, indeed, it is not astonishing that it should."

She raised the unhappy Anne, bathed her face and hands, and laid her in her berth. Then, when she opened her eyes, and seemed returning to consciousness, she covered her carefully, and hurried away with the telegram.

Next day the *Sultana* steamed into Gravesend. A tall, broad-shouldered man of about fifty, with a kindly, anxious face, stood upon the wharf, and immediately the gangway was lowered, he sprang on to it, and made his way on board the steamer.

"Where is Anne Dane?" he asked at the door of the saloon.

"Here, sir, here."

And a woman as white as death, and trembling in every limb, staggered forward and placed a lovely little girl in his arms.

"My Sylvia, my sweet little pet!" he cried, with emotion, and, pressing the child to his heart, he covered her with kisses. "Welcome, my darling—a hundred times welcome."

Then, turning to Anne, he shook her warmly by the hand.

"Thank you, thank you for your love and care. In the midst of dangers and shipwreck you have not forgotten my little one. I shall never forget your goodness, never. Come, your troubles are at an end. You shall live with and nurse my pretty Sylvia as long as she requires you; and then—well, then you may do what you please—live as you like; I will always look after you, and give you all you may require. God bless you, and thank you."

Anne could not speak for emotion. She was touched by Sir Eustace's kindness, and longed to tell him the truth. But she dared not do so. It would be risking too much. So she said nothing, and followed him quietly on shore; and thus she and the orphaned Dora found a comfortable home.

CHAPTER V

CAST UP BY THE SEA

MEANWHILE, Madge and Sylvia were suffering sadly. They clung together, sobbing and shivering. The fog was damp and cold, and they were thinly clad. Madge, always unselfish, pressed the little one to her breast, and covered her with her ulster. In the dreadful darkness that surrounded them, she knew not which of the children she held in her arms. But it mattered little which—she loved them both, and felt certain that the other was somewhere near with Anne Dane. The idea of the boats being separated, and their inmates losing each other, never entered her head. She was stunned, dazed with misery, and thought not of the future.

For many long hours they pitched about upon the sea. It was cold and dark. No friendly sail came near them through the night. A barrel of biscuits and a keg of water was all they had to keep them alive; and they were probably miles and miles from land. The sailors cursed and swore and quarrelled amongst themselves, and poor Madge's heart was sick within her as she listened. Then by degrees she

began to realise the sad fate that was hers, the utter desolation that had fallen upon her—her mother dead, her father swept away to a watery grave, and she left alone to face the cruel world or perish of cold and hunger with a baby in her arms—a fair, delicate baby. For as the morning dawned, she saw it was not her sister she held to her heart, but Sylvia Atherstone. With the morning light their misery became more intense. A gale sprang up, the fog cleared away, and the sea, that had been so calm, grew suddenly wild and tempestuous. The frail bark was tossed unmercifully from side to side. Waves broke over her and filled her with water. Then it seemed as though all was over—as though all must perish. Someone flung a life-belt over Madge's head, and in a moment she was struggling for life in the midst of the angry billows.

That day, at noon, two ladies sat on the beach at a little seaside place some miles from Plymouth. They were old and thin, with careworn faces that spoke of much suffering and great anxiety.

"Well, sister," said she, who, from a certain air of command, seemed to be the elder of the two, "there is only one way out of our difficulty. We can no longer do the work ourselves and attend to our shop. Since that sad hour when we heard that we had lost our fortunes through the dishonesty of our guardians, and came to eke out an existence in this lonely village, I have not felt so weak and incapable; you too are failing in health; and so the one thing certain is, we must take a servant."

"I suppose so, Matilda," replied her sister, sighing. "But where shall we get one for the money we can offer? The maids about here ask such exorbitant wages."

"So they do, dear. But we must wait and watch. Who knows—something may turn up."

This was always Miss Matilda's cry, no matter what happened, no matter what went wrong—something would surely turn up. And so these two kind-hearted maidens had gone through life, living on little, pinching and screwing, always hoping that something would turn up; that their squandered fortune—squandered by wicked and dishonest guardians—might one day be restored to them, or that they by their own efforts should become rich and prosperous. But in spite of their industry and attention to their shop, things did not mend; nothing of any consequence ever turned up; and now, as they grew too old and feeble for their work, they were as poor and unsuccessful as on the first day when they had taken up their abode in the little village by the sea.

"Let us go home, Barbara," said Matilda, after a time. "It is dinner-hour, and some of the villagers may come round to the shop."

Barbara sighed, but rose immediately. "It is so refreshing here, Matty. The sea looks grand to-day."

"Grand. Yes; but dangerous. Think of the ships and— But what is that?" she cried in sudden excitement. "What are those men carrying? Bab! Bab! It is some one who has been drowned. Who can it be?"

The fishermen laid down their burden as Miss Matilda pressed forward to question them.

"'Tis a little lass, ma'am," said one, drawing down the cloth that covered the girl. "A little lass, with a baby in her arms."

"Poor child! Is she dead?"

"No, no. The life's in her yet."

"Then, why do you waste time in restoring her? Bring her into our house. Carry her in at once. Come, you can lay her on my bed."

"You are a good woman, Miss Matilda. God will reward you."

"Come; waste no time."

The men raised the stretcher and followed the old lady into the cottage. The bed was warmed, restoratives applied, and in a short time Madge and Sylvia were sleeping peacefully, whilst Miss Matilda watched beside them with loving anxiety.

"Matilda," whispered Barbara, stealing up to the bedside and gazing at the children in alarm, "it was foolish to take them in. We are poor. How can we feed and clothe these unfortunate waifs?"

Miss Matilda raised her eyes towards heaven. A beautiful smile played round the corners of her mouth, and illumined her withered countenance.

"God sent them to us," she said simply. "I am glad; happy to shelter them and save them from starvation—or the workhouse. We are poor, as you say; but believe me, sister, God is good—something will surely turn up."

CHAPTER VI

A CRUEL SEPARATION

In a few days Madge was herself again. The damp night air, the terrors of shipwreck, and the cruel struggle with the angry waves, had done her but small injury. The old ladies who had so kindly taken her in, treated her with such tender care and consideration, that in a short time she was once more restored to her usual health and strength. But poor little Sylvia drooped and pined. The cold and fatigue, the long exposure she had endured, had shaken her delicate frame and left her very fragile. The child grew pale and thin; all her energy seemed gone; and she would lie for hours together on her bed without word or movement.

Madge was distracted with grief. Sylvia was all she had in the world to love, and the thought that she too might die, and leave her, was anguish. She watched her night and day. All her time was spent by her bedside; all her prayers were for her recovery.

Then, by degrees, Sylvia grew brighter, and when the sun shone, and the air felt warm and balmy, Madge would wrap her up carefully, and carry her

down to the beach. Here they would sit the best part of the day—Sylvia sleeping or playing with shells, Madge reading, or thinking sadly over their unhappy fate.

One day, about six months after their rescue from the waves, Madge sat as usual amongst the rocks with Sylvia on her knee. The child had improved of late. She had still a white, pinched look about her little face. Her form was slight, her back weak, her shoulders round. But her eyes were bright, and her lips wreathed with smiles, as she looked up at Madge, and listened to her sweet low song.

Miss Barbara suddenly appeared at the cottage door, and, shading her eyes with her hand, gazed down towards the beach.

"Here they are," she said. "I must speak to Madge at once. It will be a blow to the child. But what can we do?"

She picked her way across the stones, and, coming behind Madge, touched her on the shoulder.

She first started and looked round. Then, seeing who was there, moved a little, and made room for the old lady beside her on the rock.

"Sylvia is better to-day," she said brightly. "See, Miss Barbara, she looks quite gay."

"So she does. And I am delighted to see the change. It will make it more easy for you to part with her."

"Part with her? Oh, Miss Barbara—I—why?"

"My dear child," answered the lady kindly, "some-

thing must be done. We cannot go on as we have been doing any longer. We cannot, indeed."

"But—but parting with baby. What difference can that make?"

"This. And you must not be vexed, child. It is necessity that forces me to speak. There will be one less to feed, and you will have time to work."

Madge flushed hotly, and turned away her head. But presently she looked round again. Her eyes were full of tears. "I have been very thoughtless—very selfish," she cried. "But, indeed, from this hour I will work hard. Only—please—please don't send Sylvia away."

"My dear, we must, and, believe me, it will be for your good and hers."

"Oh, how—how?" sobbed Madge.

"In this way. You will be able to work and earn your bread, and at the same time educate yourself; whilst she will be happy and well taken care of."

"But where is she to go?"

"To the Orphanage at Plymouth."

Madge gasped.

"To the Orphanage. Oh, Miss Barbara!"

"Well, dear, it is all we can do for her. And it is only through the kind influence of the squire's wife that we can manage even that. You tell us the child belongs to rich people—that her grandfather is wealthy—but your information is vague; beyond that, and that his name is Atherstone, you know nothing. So how are we ever to get at him?"

"We must find her grandfather in time."

"In time, perhaps. But that may mean years, or never. Advertisements have been put in the papers. But no notice has been taken. And surely, if any man were in doubt as to the fate of his grandchild, he would have made a fuss, advertised, put detectives on the track, and"—

"He thinks she is dead, I suppose. But one day we shall find him out. How I wish I knew his name and address! But papa and Anne always spoke of him as Mr. Atherstone's father, and I never thought of asking where he lived. He was in England, that was enough for me. But now, Miss Barbara, I'd give the world to know more."

"Yes, it would be a blessing, dear. But now, as you don't, and as we cannot find him, the child must be provided for. So Matilda and I have arranged to take her to the Orphanage at once, to-morrow or next day."

"Poor little Sylvia, poor little pet!"

And Madge bowed her head, and wept bitterly.

"My dear, she is not going to prison. She will be kindly treated and carefully trained. You will be allowed to visit her at certain times, and you will be able to take her little things bought out of your wages."

"My wages?"

"Yes. Sister and I have been thinking that, when the child is gone, you would be anxious to earn some money, and so we thought you might be our servant. At least, you might help us in our work."

"Dear Miss Barbara, I'll do anything you want," cried Madge, with streaming eyes. "You and Miss Matilda have been so good to me. I'll work all day —and—and—now—I see my darling must go. But, oh, it is hard—so hard, for she is all I have."

"It is hard, I know, dearest. She has taken the place of father, mother, sister," replied Miss Barbara gently. "But listen, child; if you work well in the mornings in the house, you shall go to school in the afternoons. The organist will teach you music, if he finds you have talent; and the squire's daughter, Miss Tranmore, has offered to teach you French. You are a lady born, we see; and we are resolved to do all we can to give you a lady's education. Our friends are most generous, and anxious to help us."

"You are good, you are good!" murmured Madge. "Miss Barbara, how can I ever thank you?"

"By working well, and giving up your little sister as cheerfully as you can. And that reminds me, dear, of something I must tell you. We all think that baby's story need not be told at the Orphanage, or in the village. It is useless, and may cause her annoyance as she grows older. It is enough to say she is an orphan, without mentioning her rich grandfather. For who knows?—if the authorities heard of him, they might refuse to admit her, and then what should we do?"

"Just as you please; I don't suppose it matters."

"And then this miniature and gold chain. You had better keep them for her till she grows up, and you tell her her story."

"Till she grows up? Is my darling to be poor all her life, then?"

"Probably. I see no chance of anything else."

"Poor little Sylvia!"

"And, Madge, the squire's wife thinks Sylvia too grand a name; she says we should call the child something more simple."

Madge drew the baby to her breast and kissed her passionately.

"Very well," she said. "We are two lonely, desolate waifs. She has taken my sister's place—she shall take my sister's name. That is simple enough, even for a penniless orphan."

"Dora Neil? Yes, that will do admirably."

Then Miss Barbara bowed her head, and left the children alone.

The next day Sylvia was carried to Plymouth, and admitted to the Orphanage as Madge's sister, little Dorothy Neil.

CHAPTER VII

A REVELATION

After this, Madge became invaluable to the two old ladies. At noon, every day, she went to the village school; on certain evenings she received music-lessons from the organist, and for three hours each week she studied French with Miss Tranmore, the squire's accomplished daughter. But the rest of her time was devoted to the service of her kind benefactors. She made the beds and swept the floors; she cooked the dinner and washed the plates and dishes— did everything, in fact, that a maid-of-all-work might do. But Miss Barbara helped as much as possible. And so, though often tired and weary, the girl was never taxed beyond her strength.

Madge was clever, and made rapid progress with her studies. She was bright, intelligent, and orderly; and as she grew older and stronger, she took upon herself the entire control of the cottage and its feeble inmates. Her employers began gradually to look to her for direction. Whatever she wished was right. Whatever she wanted done, was done.

Under her careful management, the little shop near

the beach became more attractive; the stock-in-trade more useful and likely to sell. The old ladies themselves seemed to grow younger, instead of older, and quite enjoyed papering up the many parcels they were called upon to make. For they were doing a good business, and took more money in a week now, than they had done in a month, before Madge came to live with them.

And the girl herself was very happy. She led a busy, active life, and knew that she was loved by her dear old friends.

And so the time passed quickly by. And when Madge was twenty, tall, strong, and straight, she had but one trouble in the world, and that was that she was still forced to leave her adopted sister—her darling Dora—in the Orphanage.

True, she saw her often, and Dora seemed well cared for and content. But she longed to have the child with her, to surround her with the many comforts that love alone can suggest.

This, however, was impossible; and she tried not to repine. Till Dora was old enough to earn her bread, it was better she should remain where she was; and this fact Madge made the little girl understand as soon as she was capable of doing so.

The events of that awful night, when the children had lost everyone and everything belonging to them, rose frequently in poor Madge's mind, and filled her with sorrow.

"If we could only have found my darling's grand-

father, how different would have been her lot!" she would think, each time she left the Orphanage. "'Tis cruel to see her being brought up in such a severe school, when she should have every luxury that money could buy. However, the child, if not actually happy, is content. She knows nothing of what might have been—I have spared her that pain. Such knowledge would only unsettle her mind, and make her long for what she can never have. I have now come to the conclusion that we shall never find either Mr. Atherstone or his father. So, when Dora is old enough, she must work for herself."

So thought Madge—and so certainly thought the two old ladies, till an incident occurred that changed all their ideas, and encouraged the young girl to undertake the arduous task of finding Sir Eustace Atherstone and placing his grand-daughter in his arms.

One afternoon, Madge walked along the dusty road leading from Plymouth to the little village where she lived. She had been up to Tranmore Court to see the Squire's daughter, with whom she still read French two or three times a week. Miss Tranmore was extremely fond of the girl, and very proud of her as a pupil.

"I declare, Madge," she had said that day, "you are wasting your time here. You are too good for your present position. I really think you ought to go out as a governess; your music alone would insure your getting an excellent place."

"You are very kind to say so," replied Madge,

blushing; "and I often wish I could do something of that kind. But I would not like to leave my dear old friends. They are very dependent on me now."

"I suppose they are. And I daresay you are right not to desert them. But if you ever think of becoming a governess, remember, I will help you all I can."

Madge thanked Miss Tranmore, and took her leave. And as she walked home, she pondered deeply over her present position and future propects.

"If by going out as a governess," she thought, "I could earn more money and save for Dora, I might—perhaps I ought to go. There is little to be done here; and I sometimes weary of this dreary, monotonous existence. But yet, I could not be ungrateful. I owe my life, my health, and strength, to those dear old ladies; and as long as they live, my time and energies shall be devoted to them. Poor Dora! if only I could help her to a better—a more agreeable way of living."

Feeling hot and tired after her walk in the sun, Madge wandered down on the beach just below the cottage, and, seating herself on a rock, gazed out sadly over the calm blue sea.

"How peaceful and still it looks; and yet how cruel—how cruel it can be!" she said, shuddering. "Shall I ever—ever forget that terrible night? My mother's sudden death; my poor father's sinking down—almost before my eyes. O God! my God, how dreadful it was! And then to think of that child — the injustice she has suffered! She who

should have wealth and luxury, she who should have every care and comfort, brought up as a pauper —thrown with common companions—subjected to a treatment which, though not actually cruel or severe, is trying to one of her frail constitution."

"Please," said a sweet voice, "could you tell me the name of this stone?"

Madge looked up, her eyes filled with tears, but could not speak for a moment. She was struck dumb with astonishment.

Before her stood a dainty little lady of about ten years old. She had a beautiful face, large luminous dark eyes, thick chestnut hair, that grew in clustering curls round her forehead; a clear, fresh complexion, and a merry, laughing mouth. She was dressed in pure white. A broad Leghorn hat and drooping feathers shaded her from the sun. Her pretty feet were covered with the neatest of boots; her tiny hands in the softest of Suède gloves.

Madge was filled with wonder. Such a fairy as this was an unusual sight in Oldport, and she could not imagine where she had come from. Something in the little girl's expression seemed familiar; yet never in her life had she ever seen her before. She was about Dora's height and age, but much more healthy. And, alas! how differently attired. And as a vision of that beloved child, clad in her coarse orphan's uniform, rose before Madge, she sighed heavily.

"You seem sad," said the little stranger gently. "I am sorry I disturbed you."

"No, no," cried Madge; "you only startled and surprised me. I did not know you were near me till you spoke. What did you ask me?"

"I wanted to know what this stone was called."

Madge smiled.

"I don't think that is a stone. It is only a piece of glass, or of a soda-water bottle, probably, that has been knocked about in the sea and washed over the stones and rocks till it has got worn into that shape."

"Really? That's very curious. Thank you very much. I will put this amongst my treasures. Good-bye. I see nurse beckoning to me. I must go. May I kiss you?"

And before Madge had time to reply, the child stooped and kissed her on the lips; then, with a smile and a bow, flitted off over the shingle.

Madge turned to look after her; and just above the beach, on the road, she saw a carriage and pair. Close beside it stood an elderly woman, waving her hand and calling to the little girl.

"Miss Sylvia, we are late. Come quickly, please."

Madge grew pale as death, and started to her feet.

Sylvia? What did the woman mean? Why did she call the child by that name?

"Miss Sylvia! dear me, do hurry! There is going to be a thunderstorm. Quick, quick!"

"Yes, Anne, I'm coming. But, Anne, Anne, the stones hurt my feet."

The woman stepped down upon the beach, and gave the child her hand.

Madge hurried forward, and, gazing at the nurse, said faintly—

"Are you—can you be Anne Dane?"

The stranger looked at her in amazement.

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

"Because" — Madge trembled, and her tongue seemed tied to the roof of her mouth; her voice was low and hoarse, her words indistinct—"Because, if you are Anne Dane, who was wrecked in the *Cimbria*, who, or what is that child?"

Anne became livid, and gazed wildly round. The rain came down suddenly in great thick drops.

"Miss Sylvia," she cried, "jump into the carriage—quick!"

The little girl did as she was told. Anne followed her at once, and as she closed the door, she said to Madge—

"I *am* Anne Dane. I cannot think why you ask; but I *was* wrecked in the *Cimbria*. And this child is Miss Sylvia Atherstone."

"No, no!" shrieked Madge, running towards her with outstretched arms; she is not—"she cannot be —Sylvia is"—

But she talked to the wind. The carriage had whirled off down the road, and she was alone. The rain now fell in torrents, the thunder crashed loudly over her head; and, feeling dazed and bewildered, she ran on to the cottage.

That evening Madge could think of nothing but this strange meeting. She related all that had

happened to the two old ladies, and together they talked it over, and wondered what it all meant.

"Miss Matilda," said Madge thoughtfully, "I have had a revelation to-day. I now know, what I never before suspected. Anne Dane was saved from the wreck, and is doing well. That is evident, and is not, after all, so very wonderful. But the child—Sylvia —that is what I cannot, cannot understand."

"Well, dear," answered Miss Matilda, "it is possible that there may be another Sylvia Atherstone, daughter of another son. She, of course, would be the old gentleman's grandchild as well as our poor darling, and"—

"That is not probable, for she is, I should say, just the same age—and— But oh, Miss Matilda, a wild, a strange idea has taken possession of me. Anne has deceived Mr. Atherstone, defrauded the real Sylvia of her rights, and put another—a strange child—in her place."

"My dear Madge! But what child? Who?"

"You know I told you that my little sister Dora was the same age as Sylvia?"

"Yes. But she was drowned, remember."

"How do we know? We thought Anne Dane was drowned, but she's not."

"Then you think"—

"I think, I believe," cried Madge in great excitement, "that Dora was not drowned, but that Anne and she were saved together; and that this child, this pretty little girl I saw with her to-day, is no other than my sister, Dora Neil."

"Dear, dear!" cried Miss Barbara; "what a strange idea! But how can we prove such a thing, even if we knew where to find these people?"

Madge paced restlessly up and down the little parlour.

"How, indeed? How, indeed?" she murmured. "But it shall be done. From this hour I shall devote my life, my time, my energies, to finding Mr. Atherstone, and proving that he has been deceived. My darling Sylvia shall be restored to her rights. Justice shall be done, and"—

"That will be a difficult task, dear," said Miss Matilda. "And how, living in this small, quiet place, are you to accomplish it?"

"I shall leave this quiet place. Go"—

Miss Matilda lay back in her chair and burst into tears.

"Will you leave us, Madge?—leave us, who love you, to run over the world after such a shadow?"

Madge knelt beside the old lady, and, putting her arms round her, kissed her tenderly.

"No, dear; I'll never leave you. Do not fret. So long as you require me, I'll stay with you here. But I know—I feel certain that some day or other I must, I will restore my poor darling to her proper position in life. The thought that my sister, my pretty, innocent Dora, is usurping her place and defrauding her of her rights is bitter—very bitter to me.'

"But you are not quite certain that it is so, dear. Do not worry about it, and something will surely turn up."

The young girl smiled, and pressed Miss Matilda's hand.

"That is not the plan I go on, generally. I am not fond of waiting for something to turn up. But I must be content to do so now. My first duty is to you and Miss Barbara. Therefore we must forget this strange episode, and go on as if it had never happened."

Miss Matilda dried her eyes, and looked lovingly at Madge.

"God bless you, darling! Your words relieve me greatly. I thought you were going to leave us, and I felt sad and sick at heart. You are the one bright spot in our lives, Madge. Without you we should die."

CHAPTER VIII

A VOICE FROM THE WILDERNESS

MADGE was true to her word. She talked no more of leaving Oldport, and life in the cottage went on as before.

So the long years passed. Spring, summer, autumn, and winter came and went in quick succession, without making any difference to Madge. But she never forgot that strange meeting on the beach, and fondly imagined that some day or other she would see Anne Dane on that very spot once more. Two or three times a week she would go and sit upon the self-same rock, hoping to see the child Sylvia coming towards her over the stones.

"Perhaps I may meet her to-day," she would say. "Then I shall question her closely, and find out the true state of the case."

But every visit was a fresh disappointment. Neither nurse nor child ever appeared upon the beach again, and Madge was as far as ever from discovering the truth.

At last, despairing of ever meeting them, Madge made one more effort. She wrote out a long adver-

tisement, calling upon Anne Dane to do justice to her master's child, and imploring her to communicate with M. N., Oldport, near Plymouth. This she sent to the *Times*, paying for it out of her savings. For days, weeks, months, she watched eagerly for an answer. But, alas! none came. Stealing away from her work to the newsvendor's, where she was allowed a peep at the supplement by the good-natured woman who kept the shop, Madge would search anxiously for some sign that her advertisement had been seen. This went on for two years, and then the girl lost heart, and resigned herself to the inevitable.

"If only I were rich," she would say, "I might discover this woman, and punish her for her treachery. As it is, I am utterly powerless."

One evening Madge stood at the cottage door, silently weeping. Kind-hearted Miss Matilda was ill, and as the girl came out from the sick-room, and gazed across the sea, her heart was heavy, her thoughts full of sadness. The old lady was dying. So the doctors said. And after fourteen years spent in her service, —fourteen years during which she had been treated with much tenderness,—Madge was overwhelmed with grief as she saw the gentle friend fade slowly, but surely, to the grave.

"Dear Miss Matilda!" she murmured, whilst tears filled her eyes, and ran unheeded down her cheeks; "but for you, where should I be to-day—I and—my poor Dora?—and now you are going to leave us!" And, bowing her head, the girl sobbed aloud.

"Madge!" A pair of arms stole about her neck, and a little face, surrounded with a halo of short golden curls, was laid fondly against her breast. "You must not weep, dearest. Miss Matilda is happier than we are."

"Why, darling?" And Madge clasped the speaker tightly in her arms.

"Because she is leaving this weary world, and going home to God. She looks so happy, so peaceful, I am sure she is going to heaven. Oh, Madge, Madge, what a happiness it would be to go in her place—or with her!"

"But, Dora, you are not unhappy, love?"

"Not now, Madge. Not when I am with you."

Madge sighed, and kissed the girl passionately.

"Would that I could keep you always, pet! And perhaps soon I may be able to do so."

"I could work, dear. I am small and thin, but I can sew beautifully." And, with a shudder, "I do so hate the Orphanage."

"But they are not unkind to you there?"

"No, not exactly; but they are rough and rude. And you see I am not like the others, Madge."

"No, dearest, not at all like."

"They are, for the most part, big, healthy girls, strong and tall and well made, whilst I"—and the poor child hid her blushing face. "I—oh, Madge, I am deformed."

"My darling, who told you so?"

"The girls. They laugh at me, and call me 'Humpy.'"

"What a shame!" cried Madge, with flaming cheeks. "But do not mind them, darling; it is not true. You are small and fragile. Your shoulders are a little round because you are weak. That cruel shipwreck injured your poor spine; but the doctor says if you could lie, you would outgrow it, and become as straight as anyone. That night upon the sea nearly killed you, my delicate child; and so"—

But Madge could say no more. The sight of those appealing eyes, the sad spectacle of Dora's thin, bent little frame, was more than she could bear, and she sobbed bitterly.

"Even you, with all your love, cannot deceive me," said Dora sadly. "I know I am not like other girls. I used not to mind it so much. But now, since you told me who I am—since I have heard what I ought to be, everything seems harder. I know it is God's will, and I try to bear it; but still"—

"Oh, Dora, Dora, I would die to make you happy. But what can I do?" And Madge pressed the girl to her heart.

"Let me stay with you," pleaded Dora. "Do not send me back to the Orphanage."

"My darling, if it lay with me, I would never part with you again. But you see our poor old friends."

"Are we quite dependent on them?"

"Quite. We have not a penny in the world except what they give us."

"But you work well for them, Madge—sweeping and dusting and cooking, when you are fit for much

better things. The matron says you are very well educated, and that you are wasting your time here. She says you ought to go out as a governess."

"Dora," said Madge gravely, "I am not wasting my time. I do work for my dear friends; but that is because I think it right. They were good to me in my childhood—they took me in when I was rescued an unhappy waif from the sea, and loved and cared for me all these years. Therefore I cannot—I must not desert them in their old age. Were it not so—had I not this sacred duty to perform—I should certainly be out in the world, seeking for some trace of that cruel, deceitful woman who has robbed you, my pet, of your birthright."

"But she does not know I am alive, perhaps. Do not be too hard on her, Madge."

"She must know. I feel she knows. There was guilt in her face that day on the beach. If she had nothing to fear, Dora, why did she not speak to me? Why did she hurry the child away? She knows, or for some reason dreads to know, that you are alive. But some day—some happy day, she shall be unmasked, and you, my pet, shall be rich and"—

"I don't want to be rich, Madge. I only want to be with you. And—and—this fine rich gentleman, my grandfather, would not care to acknowledge a poor little creature brought up in an orphanage as his grand-daughter. I am sure he would not."

"But he must. He shall!" cried Madge fiercely. If only I could find him—if only I could find him

But I am tied here, Dora, and know not what to do."

"Do nothing, dearest. Forget the whole affair. Forget that such persons as Anne Dane and these Atherstones exist; and let us consider what we can do to earn money and be independent. I am nearly sixteen, Madge; and I long—I cannot tell you how much—to leave the Orphanage."

"I will speak to Miss Barbara in a day or two. For the present, whilst Miss Matilda is ill, you are useful, and she likes to have you. She sent for you, Dora—I would not have dared to do so, my darling."

"I shall go up to the Court to-morrow morning, and ask Miss Tranmore for some work. I can sew beautifully, Madge; and I intend to be a dress-maker."

"Poor little Dora—poor little Dora!" murmured Madge; "how different—how different should have been your fate!"

"You must not complain, Madge; God has, after all, been very good to us. He gave us kind friends; for, although poor, our dear old ladies have loved and watched over us well."

"You have a sweet, loving nature, my darling," cried Madge, drawing the girl towards her and kissing her tenderly. "You are always good and patient. But I fear your life at the Orphanage has not been a happy one."

"Yet not unhappy. Had I been—well, stronger" —Dora blushed deeply—"and a little rougher, I

would surely have got on better. Still, dear, I was never unkindly treated."

"Yet you long to leave the place, even at the risk of wanting much and working hard. Oh, Dora, Dora, you have suffered much. But believe me, dearest, I was powerless to prevent it."

"Of course. I know that well, my darling sister," said Dora caressingly. "And now that I am almost a woman, I feel I must work, and do what I can for myself. So if you will allow me, I'll stay with you here, and seek work in the village."

"You shall do so if I can manage it, dearest; and I know our friends will keep you if they can. Miss Tranmore would help you too. However, we shall see. I must go in now, Dora; Miss Matilda may be awake, perhaps."

"Yes, she has slept long this afternoon. But stay for a moment, Madge. There comes the postman—he may have something for you."

"I think not, dear," said Madge, smiling. "A letter for me is an unheard-of event. We are utterly friendless, you and I, Dora; outside this small village there is not a creature knows of our very existence."

"Then Anne Dane is not the cruel, hard-hearted woman you sometimes make her out," said Dora roguishly. "If she doesn't know"—

"Anne Dane. I forgot her for the moment. But she does not care to remember. In fact"—

"A letter for Miss Madge Neil," said the postman, —"a registered letter."

Then, as the girl gave him her signature for the letter, he touched his hat, smiled at the look of surprise on her face, and, bidding her "good evening," passed on.

Madge stared at the address, and turned the letter round.

"Who can it be from?" whispered Dora.

"I don't know, dear. I cannot think."

"Perhaps it is a mistake?"

"No, dear," replied Madge slowly, "it must be for me. See, it has my name in full. It cannot be a mistake."

"Then look at it, Madge. Quick. I am longing to know what it is about."

Madge tore open the envelope, and a cry escaped her lips.

Within the packet were Bank of England notes—five crisp ten-pound notes, and round them was a sheet of paper, on which was written—

"To Madge Neil, from one who wishes her well in life."

The young girl flushed hotly; then grew suddenly white as marble.

"It is from Anne Dane," she cried, with trembling lips. "She has seen my advertisement. She knows now—has known for years, that you live."

"But, Madge, perhaps it is not from her. How"—

"My dear, it must be from her. She is the only creature in the world, outside this village, who ever

heard of Madge Neil. She must have seen my last advertisement in the *Times*. She is stricken with remorse; but alas! alas! it only makes her after all these years send a little money. If she had but given her address! Would that she had—would that she had!"

"This comes from London, Madge," said Dora, examining the postmark. "She lives in London, perhaps."

"A voice from the wilderness," said Madge dreamingly, as she took the envelope; "from the wilderness, but still distinctly a voice—for this small indication will be a help, a ray of light, dear, that may aid us to discover her. Some day, as soon as I am free, we shall go to London, and with God's assistance we shall find this woman, and restore you to your home and friends."

"If you are determined to do so, it shall be done," cried Dora, clinging to Madge and laying her head upon her breast. "But, indeed, darling, I want no other friends than you. They would all be strangers to me, and I hate strangers."

"Poor little girl," said Madge gently, smoothing the golden hair,—"poor little tender-hearted darling. But one thing is certain now, pet. You need not return to the Orphanage. This money makes that quite unnecessary."

"Oh, Madge, what joy!" cried Dora rapturously. "I positively love Anne Dane. Her money has made me happier than I have ever been before. To live

with you has been the dream of my life. This cottage always seemed a small paradise to me. So, Madge, Madge, Anne Dane is my benefactor after all!" And Dora's sweet, silvery laughter rang out on the evening air.

"I am thankful to her for having made you happy, darling," answered Madge gravely. "But oh, the years of happiness she has robbed you of!"

"Do not be unjust, dearest. It has not been altogether her fault, remember!"

"Of course not. She did not cause the shipwreck, or our separation in the boats. However, some day we shall know all. Come in now, dear, and see if Miss Matilda still sleeps."

And Madge kissed little Dora's earnest, pleading lips, and drew her into the cottage.

CHAPTER IX

ON THE TRACK

Miss Matilda's sleep that afternoon was long and deep, for never again did she open her eyes to look upon sister or children, but passed away in silent peace.

From the hour of her sister's death, Miss Barbara drooped and pined. She fell into a state of melancholy and depression, grew weak in mind and body, and was an object of constant care and attention.

Madge watched over her with all the love and tenderness of a loving daughter, whilst Dora helped with the housework and looked after the little shop.

But at last, as winter changed into spring, the poor lady caught a severe cold, and in a few short days followed her beloved Matilda to the grave.

Madge mourned deeply for the loss of her kind friends; and yet she could not but rejoice at the freedom that their death had given her. She was now her own mistress; and after many years of patient waiting was at liberty to leave Oldport, and go forth into the world, in search of Anne Dane.

So, without delay, she resolved to give up the cottage and start for London. The sale of the stock that remained in the shop, and the simple furniture of the house, brought her some ten or twelve pounds. This, and the money sent by her anonymous friend, was the sum total of her fortune. But with that amount the girls felt they could make their way to the metropolis, and live with economy, till Madge got on as a daily governess, and Dora as a dressmaker's assistant.

All these arrangements took some time to make; but at last they were complete. Everything was sold. The cottage passed into the hands of strangers; and Madge and Dora, having packed up all their belongings, were looking forward eagerly to their much-talked-of journey.

During the days of the sale, and whilst Madge wound up her affairs, the two girls stayed at the house of a respectable woman, who had known them from their childhood. She had a married sister who let lodgings in London, and to her Madge wrote, asking if she could give her a couple of rooms in her house.

But when Mrs. Skinner's reply came, the girl was horrified at the sum demanded for the small accommodation she required. It was more than Miss Matilda had paid for the cottage in which they had all lived comfortably, and she feared she could not afford to spend so much upon her rooms alone.

"Lor' bless you, that's nothing for London," said

their hostess. "Just you wait, Miss Madge, till you see how dear everything is. You'll be astonished."

"But there must be cheaper places than this, surely," replied Madge. "I must try and find one, Mrs. Fleet. I must, indeed."

"Well, miss, take my advice and go there first; it's a respectable place. And my sister's an honest woman. You didn't ought to go wanderin' through London promiscuous like, you an' Miss Dora. You didn't ought to, indeed."

"Perhaps not, Mrs. Fleet," said Madge, sighing, "It is a large rent, but I suppose I'd better take the rooms for the present."

And she wrote off engaging them at once.

"And now, my darling," Madge said to Dora on the morning of their departure from Oldport, "we have two farewell visits to pay. One to the cemetery, to place our last flowers upon our friends' grave, the other to Miss Tranmore. Are you nearly ready to start?"

"Yes. I have just finished," answered Dora. And she held up a beautiful wreath of primroses and violets. "Is it not pretty?"

"Lovely, dearest. You have the fingers of a fairy. You could make anything, I believe."

"I wish I could, Madge. And I do hope that Madame Garniture, of London, may think as highly of me as you do. Miss Tranmore says she has promised to give me plenty of work, if she finds I can do it well."

"I am not uneasy about that, Dora. But I'm afraid the workroom will try you. It is sure to be hot and stuffy. And you are not strong, my pet."

"No. But I think I shall be able to bear the heat of the room, for the sake of what I shall earn," answered Dora, smiling. "I am longing to make piles of money for you, Madge."

"And I am bent on getting you a fortune before the year is out. Not by work, but by restoring you to your rights. Something tells me I shall soon find Anne Dane."

Dora laughed.

"I am not so sanguine, dear. And if you did find her, it would probably be of no use. We have no proofs, remember."

"That's what Miss Tranmore always says. She declares Anne Dane would never confess, or acknowledge you as the lost child, and that I may just as well not look for her."

"And I think she is right. Although, I must say, I'd like to find her, even if it were only to know what she has been doing all these years, and how she was rich enough to send you fifty pounds; also why she sent it, and yet will not write and let you know where she is."

"I know where she is," said Madge quietly. "I have known it all along."

"Madge!" Dora looked at her in astonishment.

"Well, dear, do not open your eyes so wide. We both know. We feel certain that Anne Dane must

be with Mr. Atherstone. So in that way we know indirectly where she is."

"Yes, indirectly. But there may be any number of Atherstones in London. Miss Tranmore says it is an enormous place—a wilderness, and that people don't know their next-door neighbours. In fact, she says it's like looking for a needle in a bundle of hay, to set out to find anyone there, unless you really know where they live and who they are."

"Perhaps so. But I may as well live in London as in Oldport. And I am determined to find Anne Dane. If I could only meet her and confront her with you, and that portrait of your mother, Dora, she would be obliged to recognise you as Sylvia Atherstone. That is the one proof we possess. And I don't think it's a bad one."

"No," said Dora, drawing out the miniature which she always wore round her neck since leaving the orphanage. "I can see myself that I am like it. Dear little mother, you were prettier than I. Your shoulders were straight, your figure well-formed. But still, your child is wonderfully like you. What was my father like, Madge?"

"Tall and noble-looking, with, oh, such a kind face and sweet, gentle eyes!" said Madge, with much animation. "I was only a little girl when I saw him, Dora, but I shall never forget him. He was so good to us all—so—so kind to father. Oh, if I could but let him see you, our troubles would soon be at an end, darling."

"I wonder where he is, Madge?"

"Somewhere in the Bush, dear. Father said he enjoyed his free, careless life there so much that nothing would tempt him to go home."

"It seems strange that he should like it so much."

"Not at all, dear. It is a glorious country. If you only saw the flowers, Dora—the exquisite ferns, that only grow in hothouses here, growing by the roadside; the gorgeous scarlet lilies thirty feet high, the splendid trees, the beautiful birds. Oh, my dear, if you saw all this, you would not wonder that people should love Australia."

"Perhaps not," said Dora thoughtfully. "But if I were a father, and had a little daughter in England, I think I would leave even the most beautiful land to see her, and take her in my arms."

"But he may have been told that you were drowned."

"So he may. But who then is the child you saw with Anne Dane? I thought you believed she had taken my place—that she was"—

"The real Dora Neil. I sometimes think so. But I may be wrong. I hope I am. I could not bear to think of my sister usurping your place."

"And I would rather think she did, dear. I often wonder what that little girl was like, Madge, whose fate was so curiously mixed up with mine. It would make me very happy to think of her grown up tall and beautiful, enjoying the comforts of my grand-

father's house, instead of lying cold and dead at the bottom of that cruel sea."

"You have a tender, loving heart, my pet. But remember that if my sister is really in your place, it will make it much harder for me to prove that you are Sylvia Atherstone, and punish Anne Dane."

"Yes, I know that; but except that I should have money to help you, I don't want to be Sylvia Atherstone. I am not fit to be a fine lady, and I am quite happy with you."

"God bless you, my darling! Your love is very precious to me," said Madge, drawing the fair head upon her breast, and kissing the sensitive lips. "Your happiness is the one thing I wish for. But I have a duty to perform, Dora, and do it I will."

"Dear, strong, determined Madge," answered Dora, smiling. "But come, dear. Let us go to the cemetery at once. Our hours are passing, and we have much to do."

"Quite true, dear. We have not much time, and I must see Miss Tranmore. I have several things to ask her. So come along. I'll carry this." And, taking the wreath, Madge drew Dora's hand within her arm, and they left the house together.

It was a warm day. One of those close, heavy days that sometimes come upon us in the early spring. The road to the cemetery was long and dusty; and when the girls had laid the wreath upon the grave, Dora felt tired and weary, and begged Madge to go on to the Court without her.

"I saw Miss Tranmore yesterday, dear, and I bade her good-bye. She will not expect to see me again. I do not feel able to walk so far. So I'll wait under this tree till you return."

"I'm sorry you cannot come on to the Court, dearest. You might have rested, and had some milk in the housekeeper's room. You will be lonely here."

"Not at all. I like solitude, remember. And I—well, I don't care for the housekeeper's room at Tranmore Court. So away you go, Madge. I'll dream of my future greatness till you return." And Dora laughed softly. "Good-bye, Miss Neil."

"Good-bye, dear. I'll not be very long."

And Madge kissed her hand, and started off at a brisk pace.

As her sister disappeared from sight, a cloud passed over Dora's sweet face, and she lay back with a sigh upon the grass.

"It is strange how that old feeling comes back," she murmured; "always tired, tired. Just as I used to be at the Orphanage. And I thought—I felt sure, that when I had my Madge to love me and take care of me, it would pass away. But it has not. Oh, God, make me strong. Grant that in our hard struggle for life in London, I may not be a burden on my darling."

And, clasping her hands, Dora raised her blue eyes appealingly to heaven.

The air was soft and balmy; not a sound was

heard save the sweet singing of the birds, and the burr of a steam plough in a neighbouring field.

"Surely England is a good country to live in, too," thought Dora dreamily, as she gazed out over the beautiful landscape. "And yet my father prefers the wilds of Australia—at least we think he does. He may have come home long ago, for it is wild, in spite of what Madge says about the flowers and the birds. It is wild—very. It is all so strange. Such an odd thing my story. That I, poor little I, should have a father and grandfather, both rich, strong, and powerful, and yet be dependent on Madge for everything I possess. But it shall not be so long. I'll work, and work, and with God's help support myself."

Suddenly the girl sat up and looked anxiously around. The sound of a distant cry, the tramp of horses' feet, the noise of approaching wheels fell upon her ear. On it came, nearer, rapidly nearer, till at last she saw a carriage dashing down the road towards her. It was some way off still, but, from the mad action of the horses and the swift pace at which they were going, she quickly realised that they were running away.

Dora sprang to her feet, and, running into the field where the plough was at work, called loudly to the men to come and stop the runaway horses.

"You are dreaming, young lady. There is no such a thing about here," said one of the labourers roughly. "Go along, and leave us to our work."

"Yes, yes, they are coming down the road. Quick,

there is not a moment to lose." And, catching his arm, she tried to drag him along.

He resisted, and pushed her aside with an oath. Then, as the carriage turned a corner and came into view, she started away with a cry of horror.

"There, see! If you will not stop them, I must." And she sped quickly away.

"Good God! she'll be killed," cried the man. "Go back, miss, go back."

In a few strides, he overtook the terrified girl, and, thrusting her out of his way, ran on to the road.

As the horses came madly on, the carriage swaying to and fro, its occupants calling loudly for help, the man jumped suddenly from the hedge. The animals swerved a little; their pace became less rapid; and, making a violent effort, he sprang at their heads, and seized one of them by the bridle. At first he seemed powerless to stop them, and was dragged along in the dust. But he held on bravely; and on his fellow workman coming to his aid, they at last brought the frantic creatures to a standstill.

The coachman, who had dropped the reins and was holding on to his seat like grim death, soon recovered himself, and, jumping to the ground, ran to the horses' heads.

Within the carriage were an elderly lady and a young man of about twenty or twenty-one. They were both white and frightened, and their voices shook with emotion as they thanked their deliverers.

"Come up to Ashfield Park this evening, my men," said the lady. "You have behaved nobly. We owe our lives to you. My son and I are grateful, deeply grateful; and we thank you from our hearts. But you—we must give you some reward, some substantial reward, for what you have done for us."

"Thank you, my lady," answered one of the men, bowing and touching his hat respectfully. "We only did our duty."

"Well, you did it nobly, bravely," she replied, smiling. "And I am indeed thankful for our escape."

"Yes, Lady Ashfield, I am truly thankful that my comrade and me was able to save you and his lordship," he said. "But had it not been for this little lass, your ladyship, we'd never have seen or heard anything till too late, not with the noise of the plough and the distance from the road."

"Really?" cried the lady, stretching out of the carriage and shaking Dora warmly by the hand. "Thank you, dear, thank you. But you look very white. Were you frightened?"

"Yes," said Dora faintly, and clasping her hands tightly together. "But—but—thank God you are saved! I did very little, I assure you. I was too weak and small to stop the horses, and I only just called and made the men come."

"You showed wonderful presence of mind, dear. Didn't she, Charlie?"

"Yes, mother, she certainly did. But I am afraid," said the young man kindly, "that the effort has been

too much for her. She looks ill and faint. If she is not too nervous to trust herself in the carriage with us, after what she has seen, I think we should drive her home. She seems unable to walk, and the horses are quiet now. Aren't they, Smith ?"

"Yes, my lord," replied the coachman. "They are right enough now."

"Will you get into the carriage beside my mother ?" asked Lord Ashfield, turning to Dora. "And we'll drive you wherever you wish to go."

"Oh, please, I can't," she answered. "I"—

"What ? Are you nervous ?"

"No. But I am waiting here for my sister, and if she came and found me gone, she would be alarmed. I must not go, please. I can sit and rest till she comes. So pray, pray do not mind me."

"But these men would tell her."

"Oh, no, no, I would rather wait. I would, indeed."

"Very well. You shall do as you like. But I hope you will come and see my mother to-morrow."

"Yes," said Lady Ashfield; "please do."

"But I cannot. We—Madge and I go to London this afternoon."

"To London ?"

"Yes. We are going there to live and work."

"Is Madge your sister ?"

"Yes—that is"—Dora blushed as it suddenly flashed across her that after all Madge, her darling Madge, was not her sister. For years, all her life in fact, she had called her by that sweet name, and

had forgotten that she was not so in reality. But now, with Lord Ashfield's inquiring eyes fixed upon her, she remembered that she was not speaking the truth in saying that she and Madge were sisters.

"What is your name, dear?" asked Lady Ashfield, wondering at the girl's confusion.

"My name." Dora paused, then, smiling, she raised her beautiful eyes to the lady's face. "I am called Dorothy Neil."

"Have you been long in Oldport?"

"Not long. I was brought up at B—— Orphanage. Madge lived in Oldport with Miss Matilda and Miss Barbara Parry."

"Then you are one of the children saved from the wreck of the *Cimbria* some fourteen years ago?"

"Yes. I was a tiny child at the time."

"The *Cimbria*?" cried Lord Ashfield. "Why, that was the name of the steamer in which Sylvia Atherstone was wrecked."

Dora started and grew white to the lips.

"Yes, the very same," replied his mother. "She and her nurse were fortunately picked up by a passing steamer. This child and her sister were washed ashore at Oldport. I have lived so much abroad that I only heard of them the other day. If I had known sooner, I would certainly have told Sir Eustace. He would surely have helped them, had he been told. The very fact of their having been in the same wreck with his beloved grandchild would have made him love them."

"Yes, I am sure it would," said Lord Ashfield, smiling. "For truly he idolises his beautiful Sylvia."

"Oh, pray tell me," asked Dora in a shaking voice, "do you know her?"

"Sylvia Atherstone? Oh yes, very well."

"But is she really the Sylvia I mean—my—the child that came home from Australia?"

"In the *Cimbria*. Yes."

"And," continued Dora eagerly, "was her nurse Anne Dane?"

"Certainly," answered Lady Ashfield, smiling. "But you cannot remember either of them. You are just about Sylvia's age."

"I am Sylvia," rose to the girl's lips. But she suddenly reflected how foolish it would be to make such a statement to strangers, who would probably think her mad. So she choked back the words, and said in a low voice—

"Yes, the same exactly. I was sixteen my last birthday."

"You look younger," said Lady Ashfield. "But then Sylvia is tall and"—

"And straight," cried Dora. "I hope—oh, say she is straight, please! I was injured in the wreck. But she"—

"Was more fortunate, dear child. She escaped all injury, and is straight and strong."

"Thank God for that, thank God for that!" murmured Dora, half to herself. "Straight and beautiful, she is more fit to be a fine lady than a poor

weak little girl like me. And oh," she added aloud, "Madge will be so glad to hear that"—

Then she stopped abruptly, as she remembered how much Madge longed to know where Anne Dane lived, how anxious she was to discover her grandfather, and restore her to his arms.

"Well," said Lady Ashfield, "why do you stop? Madge will, of course, be pleased to hear that Miss Atherstone is well. And Anne also, for I suppose she has not forgotten them."

"No," answered Dora, "she has not. And oh, dear Lady Ashfield, could you tell me where Sylvia and Anne Dane live?"

"Certainly. Sylvia lives with her grandfather."

"And Anne Dane?"

"Is her maid, I believe."

"But where? In what place do they live?" Dora questioned eagerly.

"Generally in the country. I declare you are quite curious about them." And Lady Ashfield laughed. "But I suppose that is only natural, so I will give you all the information I can. The Atherstones, and I presume Anne Dane, are abroad now, and do not return for another year and a half. They will be in London then, as Sylvia is to be presented."

"But where are they abroad?" cried the girl. "What is their address? Dear lady, do not think me rude. Forgive me, if I ask too many questions. But Madge is longing to see, to know where Anne Dane is."

"Indeed? I suppose she was kind to her on board ship? Well, it is very nice of Madge to be grateful. But I really cannot tell you where she is at present. My son and I left the Atherstones in Paris a month ago. They were going on into Italy. Where, I don't exactly know."

Dora sighed heavily, and murmured sadly—

"Poor Madge! And I thought I should have good news to tell you."

"Well," said Lady Ashfield, "in about a year and a half Madge may have the happiness of meeting her old friend. At the end of that time, call at my house in London, 16 Belgrave Street, and I will tell you where the Atherstones are."

"Oh, thank you," cried Dora, smiling brightly. "Madge will be so glad!"

"And now, dear, tell me, what is Madge going to do in London?"

"Teach music. She is so clever." The girl's eyes shone with proud delight. "Miss Tranmore says she plays most exquisitely."

"Who taught her?"

"The organist of the church and Miss Tranmore."

"That is very good. I may be able to get her some pupils. So tell Madge to come to see me in London next week. I should like to help her and you all I can."

"Thank you so much. You are too kind, too good."

"Not at all. You saved our lives, remember, by

your presence of mind. I wish I could be of real assistance to you. What are you going to do?"

Dora blushed deeply, and tears rushed into her eyes.

"Alas! there is not much I can do," she said sadly. "I learned but little at the Orphanage. But I am determined not to be a burden upon Madge. I can sew well. I shall try to be a dressmaker."

"A dressmaker?" cried Lord Ashfield in a tone of horror. "Such a thing is quite impossible. The air of the workroom would kill you. And association with the apprentices would be torture for you. You are not fit for such a life."

"It is the only thing I can do," said Dora gravely. "It will be torture, I daresay. But it must be done."

"But surely there must be other ways," he cried impetuously. "It is not right that a young lady should lower herself, and mix with common work-girls."

Dora laughed merrily.

"I don't think I shall mind that," she said. "The children at the Orphanage were not ladies, and I got on very well with them for nearly fourteen years."

"Yes, but then country girls are quite different from those in town. I do not think you should lower yourself in such a manner," he said earnestly. "I don't indeed."

"I shall not lower myself, Lord Ashfield," replied Dora, with much dignity. "My father was a gentleman, my mother a lady. I shall not forget what I

owe to their name. But did I refuse to do what lay in my power, in order to help Madge—did I sit idly by, lest I should lower myself by working as a dressmaker, I should feel myself unworthy to be their child."

"Bravely spoken, dear," said Lady Ashfield approvingly. "And you are quite right. No honest work can lower anyone. A lady born remains so, no matter what her employment is. I always respect and honour a poor lady who works for her own independence, instead of living in idleness at the expense of some hard-working friend."

"Why, mother, you are quite eloquent," cried Lord Ashfield. "And I must confess I stand rebuked. But, all the same, I do not think Miss Neil's choice of work a good one. The life will not suit her."

"Well, we must consider what is to be done," she answered. "Come and see me soon, dear child, and I will help you all I can. And now, Ashfield, we must say good-bye to our deliverer. It is late, and we have a long drive before us yet. Good-bye, little Dora, till next week."

And, drawing the girl towards her, Lady Ashfield kissed her on the forehead.

"Good-bye, Miss Neil," said Ashfield, raising his hat, and holding Dora's hand for a moment within his own. "I am very grateful to you for your goodness to us this afternoon. I hope we may soon meet again. Do not forget my mother's address, 16 Belgrave Street. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," said Dora faintly, and as she raised her large earnest eyes to his face, they were full of tears. "God must have sent you and Lady Ashfield to me to-day. It will make everything easy for Madge and me, when we have such friends to look after us in London. Good-bye."

Then Lord Ashfield stepped into the carriage beside his mother, and the horses, now perfectly quiet, started at a brisk pace down the road.

"What a sweet face that child has!" said Lady Ashfield, looking back and waving her hand to Dora. "She is really quite pretty."

"Pretty?" he cried earnestly. "She is beautiful."

"Beautiful? Oh no."

"Oh yes, mother, she is beautiful," he insisted. "That simple child has the face of an angel."

CHAPTER X

A BITTER DISAPPOINTMENT

Dora's account of the runaway horses, and her conversation with Lady Ashfield and her son, was listened to with much interest by Madge.

That after all these years of waiting they should at last come across people who knew the Atherstones and Anne Dane, was great happiness for the girl. And the promise of help from a lady of position filled her with hope for her own success in the arduous life she was about to enter upon.

She longed to see Lady Ashfield at once, to question her closely about Anne Dane; to ask more particulars about the supposed Sylvia; and if she should find it necessary or useful in carrying out the great object she had in view, to take the lady into her confidence. But as she and Dora were obliged to go to London that afternoon, and Lady Ashfield remained a week longer in the country, she was forced to postpone the much-desired interview whether she wished it or not.

Miss Tranmore had given Madge a letter of introduction to a Mrs. Prim, who kept a school at Kensington, and required a governess to help her

with her pupils. To this lady, therefore, the girl went on her arrival in town, and was immediately engaged at a very moderate salary. For this she was obliged to take a large part in the teaching of the school. She taught music to the older girls, and everything else, including the elements of French, to the small children.

The hours at Penelope Lodge were nominally from nine to four. But when the bell rang for the scholars to go their way, they handed their finished exercises to Madge, and whilst they rushed off gaily to their homes, the weary governess had to sit down to correct their work, and make up the mark-books accordingly. And so the poor girl soon found that she had but little spare time, as, for one reason or another, she never left the schoolroom till past seven, and it was generally eight o'clock before she got home to Dora and supper.

So the days passed quickly by, and it was with deep regret that she was obliged to delay still longer her visit to Lady Ashfield.

But at last, one day, at the end of her first month in the school, she was informed that she might leave early on the following Saturday afternoon. This was pleasant news for Madge, and she resolved to take advantage of her holiday and go to Belgrave Street. So at three o'clock Dora called for her at Penelope Lodge, and the two girls set out together to pay their much-talked-of visit to Lady Ashfield.

They were both in good spirits and much excited. Madge had determined to tell Lady Ashfield the true

story of the wreck, and felt certain that in a short time her darling would be rescued from her present wretched life and restored to her proper position.

For much as Madge had suffered in her badly-paid situation, poor Dora had suffered infinitely more. The hours in Madame Garniture's dressmaking establishment were long and wearisome, the work monotonous, the rooms hot and stifling, the girls vulgar, coarse, and frivolous. And sweet, delicate Dorothy pined and grew thin in the unwholesome atmosphere. But she never complained. Her heart was set on helping Madge, and no matter how tired she felt in the evenings, she had always a smile of welcome for her dear sister on her return from the school. Nevertheless, Madge was not deceived by this forced gaiety, and she became more and more anxious to find the Atherstones, and put an end to her darling's troubles as speedily as possible. Through Lady Ashfield she felt sure she could do this. And so she longed most ardently to see and speak to her.

"I hope Lady Ashfield may not have forgotten me," said Dora nervously. "It is so long. It seems almost a lifetime since that day in Oldport."

"It is only a month, dearest," said Madge gently. "You saved her life and her son's by your presence of mind. No one, not even the coldest, most thoughtless person, could forget that in a few short weeks."

"And I am sure she was neither cold nor thoughtless. She had a kind, though a proud face. And Lord Ashfield! Oh, Madge, he had such a strong,

straightforward look. He would never forget, I am sure. He is too noble for that."

And Dora's pale cheek flushed, and her blue eyes sparkled.

Madge looked at her curiously.

"You seem to have made him your hero, darling—your ideal."

Dora laughed, and her colour deepened.

"Is that wonderful, Madge? He was so good and kind, and looked so splendidly handsome, yet so unconscious. His manner to me, poor little weakly me, was as polite and—and gracious as though he had been speaking to his equal."

"And so he was, dear. He felt what you were. He could not mistake you, for you are a true lady my pet, in spite of your poor surroundings."

"I don't know about that, Madge. A lady should not feel nervous and frightened when speaking to strangers. A lady should forget herself and her looks, and I can't."

"That is only shyness natural at your age, dearest. I am sure the highest lady in the land has felt that at sixteen."

"But I always remember my deformity," said Dora in a low voice. "I known it is wrong and foolish. But"—

Madge stopped short, and, looking Dora's tiny figure up and down with close attention, said gravely—

"My dear child, you are not deformed."

"Oh, Madge!"

"Oh, Dora! I would not deceive you for the world. And what I tell you is true. I think I told you so long ago at Oldport. You are not deformed. You are small, you are thin, slighter than anyone I ever saw. Your shoulders from weakness are round —one perhaps a trifle—mind, I say a trifle—higher than the other. But that is not remarkable, and would disappear very soon if you could rest and grow strong. Then your face, my pet, makes up for everything; it is lovely. Your eyes are the purest of blue, your hair like threads of gold."

"Enough, Madge," cried Dora, laughing. "In your anxiety to comfort me, you are going too far. But nothing you can say will change my opinion of myself. I have known it,"—sighing—"for many years. But I never felt it so keenly as on that day when Lord Ashfield spoke to me, and I read pity in his eyes."

"What a shame! He is not such a hero after all, then, my darling He must be weak and stupid."

"Hush, Madge, I cannot listen to you. Such words do not describe him. They should never be used when speaking of him."

"Well, dearest, when you are recognised as Miss Atherstone"—

"That would make no difference. I am as near him as Dora Neil as ever I could be. But oh, Madge, when I heard that Sylvia—for she will always be Sylvia to me—was tall and beautiful, I put her next him in my mind, and I thought: She will look well by

his side. She, if she is as good as she is said to be beautiful, will be worthy to be his wife."

"Dora, you are a dreamer. And in your dreams you have given this young man too high a place. You know nothing of him, and yet you have endowed him with all kinds of virtues that, perhaps, he does not possess. When you meet him again, you will probably find him full of faults, a mere frivolous worldling."

"No," replied the young girl gravely, "that could never be. With such a noble face he could not be that. If we ever meet— But here we are at Belgrave Street. Oh, Madge, have you courage to go in?"

"Certainly. I came to see Lady Ashfield, and if I can manage it, I will do so."

And walking boldly up the steps, she rang the bell. Several moments passed, and not a sound was heard within the house. No one appeared to open the door.

"How strange!" said Madge. "Where can all the servants be?"

"Perhaps the bell did not ring," suggested Dora. "Try again, dear."

Madge did so, and this time more successfully, for almost immediately footsteps were heard coming up the hall. A chain rattled noisily, a bolt was withdrawn, and a dirty-looking old woman put out her head.

"Wot does yer want?" she inquired, staring hard at the visitors.

"We want to see Lady Ashfield, please," said Madge.

"Lady Ashfield ain't at 'ome. She"—

"But she would like to see us. She told us to come."

"I tell yer 'er ain't at home. She's in furrin parts."

"Where?" asked Madge.

"I'm blest if I know. Mrs. Downside, the 'ouse-keeper, knows, but she's hout. She sends papers and letters and cards to some outlandish furrin place. But I'm not much of a scholard, so I don't right remember it. Will you leave a card, miss?"

"Oh no, it doesn't matter," cried Dora. "We have no cards. But when did Lady Ashfield go abroad?"

"Nearly a month ago. 'Er father took ill, and she went off all of a sudden."

"When will she be back?" said Madge.

"Don't know. Not for many a month, I'm thinkin'. Perhaps more nor a year."

"Oh, Madge, what a pity we did not come here at once, the very day after we arrived in London!" cried Dora. "I am so sorry."

"So am I, dear. But we could not help it. I was obliged to go to the school first," said Madge sadly. "It was a certainty. Lady Ashfield's promised help was not. She has probably forgotten all about us."

"I cannot believe that. And Lord Ashfield, he would not, he could not forget."

"But, my dear, he could do nothing for us—at least, perhaps, after all, he might. Through him, Dora, we might find the Atherstones. Tell me," Madge said, turning to the old woman, "Is Lord Ashfield in London?"

"No. 'E's at Oxbridge, or on the Continong. I don't rightly know," she replied. "But 'e's not in Lunnon, I know that."

"Thank you," said Madge. "Good morning. Come, Dora, there is no more to be done. Let us go home."

"Oh, Madge, I am so disappointed!" And, forgetful of time and place, Dora burst into tears.

"Come, darling, you must not weep," said Madge soothingly. "I, too, am bitterly, keenly disappointed. But we must not give way to despair. We may come across the Atherstones some other way."

"Always those Atherstones, Madge," cried Dora, impatiently. "I hate their name. I don't care if I never see them. But"—

"My dear child, you forget how much depends on our finding them. Of what value are these Ashfields, except as a means to attain the end we have always had in view? If I thought they could not help me to that, I should never wish to see them, I assure you."

"Madge!"

Dora's voice was full of indignation, and her eyes flashed angrily, as she looked at her sister. Then her lips trembled slightly, and a faint colour rose to her pale cheeks. "But, of course," she added softly, "that is not wonderful. You do not know the Ashfields as I do."

"Well, darling, we must both forget them as fast as we can," said Madge cheerfully. "Come, Dora, dry your eyes, dear, and let us go home to tea."

As the two girls turned away and disappeared into the Grosvenor Road, a hansom dashed up to 16 Belgrave Street, and a young man sprang out and ran up the steps.

The old woman was standing at the door, gazing about her, but on seeing the cab stop, she fled into the hall, and began scrubbing her face and hands with her apron.

"'Is ludship, as I live. Goody, goody! an' Mrs. Downside hout for the day. Wot hever shall I do?"

"Where is the housekeeper?" asked Lord Ashfield as he entered. "Tell her I want to see her for a moment."

"Please, yer ludship, she's hout," said the old woman, making a low curtsey. "She's gone for the day."

Lord Ashfield walked up and down the hall.

"That is most awkward. I had a message to give her, a most important message from my mother."

"She'll be in by eight, or half-past, yer ludship."

"Too late. I cannot wait. My grandfather is dying. I have many things to do this afternoon, and I must go by the evening mail to Paris. I am very sorry not to see Mrs. Downside. It may make a considerable difference to those poor girls," he murmured. "I cannot get that child's lovely, pale, sad face out of my thoughts. She haunts me, and yet I am powerless, utterly powerless. Our ingratitude, our seeming forgetfulness is terrible, and yet— But they may come. I must give this woman my message. Perhaps she may deliver it properly. And to make quite sure, I'll write from Paris. Look here, Mrs."—

"Partridge, my lud."

"Well, Mrs. Partridge, I want you to give a message to Mrs. Downside."

"Yes, my lud."

"You are to give her this packet, and tell her that Lady Ashfield wishes her to give it with her love to two young ladies, who may call here any day. My mother does not know their address, and"—

"Is one dark and the other fair, my lud?"

"One is fair, certainly. Fair as a lily."

"She's been, my lud."

"Been? When? Did she leave any address? I might have time."

"She left no address, my lud, an' cried sadly, poor little lady, when she 'eard as 'er ladyship was away. She an' her sister 'ad just turned the corner when yer ludship drove hup."

"How provoking! Why didn't you tell me? Why— But, of course, you could not know. Pray excuse my heat. But Lady Ashfield is anxious, most anxious to hear from these young ladies. So tell Mrs. Downside that when they come again, she must be kind to them, and, having learned their address, send it on at once to her mistress."

"Yes, my lud. I'll not forget."

"Have these young ladies been here before?"

"I don't know, my lud. I don't open the door but seldom, an' they might 'ave come without my knowin' of it."

"Yes, of course. I'm sorry I missed them. Do not forget my message. By Jove, I must be off. How the time does pass! Good evening, Mrs. Partridge."

And Lord Ashfield jumped into his cab and drove away.

CHAPTER XI

ANXIOUS DAYS

Having learned that Lady Ashfield had left England for an indefinite period, Madge resolved to put her out of her thoughts, and forget, if possible, the bright hopes that her promises to Dora, on the day of the accident, had raised in her mind.

She was busy at the school; and during the long hours spent at the piano, or hammering history and grammar into some twelve or fourteen lazy girls, she had little time to wonder or speculate over Lady Ashfield's absence or return to town.

But Dora's work was not so absorbing. And from morning till night she thought of nothing but her next meeting with the kind lady who had promised so earnestly to help her and Madge in London. So each evening, as she returned from the dressmaker's where she spent her day, unless the weather were very bad, she would walk round by Belgrave Street, and, standing on the opposite side of the road, gaze up at the windows.

"When she comes back," she would say to herself, "the shutters will be open, the blinds pulled up.

Then Madge and I will ring the bell, and ask to see dear Lady Ashfield. Until then I shall never go nearer the house than this."

And so Mrs. Downside never saw the girls, and Lord Ashfield's packet lay forgotten in a drawer.

Day after day, week after week, Dora suffered the same keen disappointment. The house remained shut up. Lady Ashfield did not return.

This wearing anxiety, this feverish longing for something to happen, was very trying to a girl of Dora's sensitive nature. It made her restless and unsettled, and her work became a trouble to her. But she did her best to shake off the feeling of disgust, and struggled bravely on.

At last, however, the heavy atmosphere of the workroom, the long hours and close work, began to tell upon her health. She grew irregular in her attendance at Madame Garniture's establishment, and before the end of the second year she was obliged to stay at home altogether. This was a terrible grief to her. She was now unable to earn any money, and so became quite dependent on her sister. And Madge's salary was so small. Barely enough to support one, it was now called upon to do double duty, and provide both girls with the necessaries of life.

"Lady Ashfield may come home soon, Madge—she is sure to come soon," cried Dora feverishly one evening, when her sister had come back from the school a little earlier than usual. "It is now nearly two years since she went away. If she were in London, she might

give me some work to do. I am better now. I could sew here and help you. We have no money left. Oh, Madge, what shall we do to pay our rent?"

"Darling, do not fret," said Madge, putting her arm round the girl and kissing her lovingly. "Something will surely turn up." She smiled. "Don't you remember how dear Miss Matilda used always to say that? So don't cry, pet. Our landlord has promised to wait. That in itself is a boon."

"Horrid old man! I wish we had stayed with Mrs. Skinner. She was so kind and"—

"But, my love, you know her terms were impossible."

"I know, I know. If only Lady Ashfield would come home!"

"Dora, I do not believe in Lady Ashfield. My only hope, my constant prayer, is that I may soon come across the Atherstones in some way or another."

"Well, we have both a different plan for getting out of our present difficulties," said Dora, with a faint smile. "Neither is likely to succeed, I fear. But oh, my darling, if I could only work and help, I would not find it so hard, so very hard to wait." And two large tears rolled slowly down the girl's pale cheek.

"Now, I tell you what I will do, Dora. I'll go off to Madame Garniture," cried Madge, "and ask her to give you some work to do at home. Why did I never think of this before? I suppose because I fancied you were too ill to do anything. But I will go this moment. And when my darling feels her fingers busy, she may become more reconciled to her fate."

Dora's face grew bright. A sweet smile played about the corners of her mouth as she nestled up to Madge, and laid her head upon her shoulder.

"Dear little sister," she whispered, "if only I had work to do, you should never hear me grumble. Your idea is a good one. And oh, I hope, I pray, that Madame Garniture may grant your request. I think she will. She was always very kind."

"Yes. I think she will. And now I must be off. I have no time to spare."

Then, kissing Dora tenderly, Madge sprang to her feet, and putting on her hat and jacket, turned to leave the room.

"Madge," called Dora softly, "it is rather windy and cold, but if you wouldn't mind, you might go round by Belgrave Street. It is just possible that Lady Ashfield may have returned. We have neither of us been there for many months."

"Very well, dearest. I shall certainly go round that way. I don't mind the wind in the least." And, lowering her veil, Madge went quickly downstairs.

As the door closed behind her sister, Dora flung herself back upon the little hard sofa, on which she now spent much of her time. Her cheeks were flushed. She was nervous and excited.

"Something tells me they will soon return," she murmured, "and then—and then how happy I shall be. I am sure to get nice, fresh, dainty work from Lady Ashfield and some of her friends. A visit now and again from her. Music lessons for Madge—well-

paid lessons, perhaps three or four a week. The ladies at Penelope Lodge must not refuse her time in which to give them—of course not. And that will mean much more money. My work and Madge's lessons. Oh, we shall grow quite rich! And my darling shall have some new dresses—some silk ones, too—a pretty brown silk with coffee lace, and some jewels—bright gold earrings, and a brooch at her collar. Ah, how nice she will look, my bonnie Madge! And I—well, it doesn't much matter about me. But I think a blue cashmere might suit my complexion." Dora laughed softly. "What castles in the air! Very much in the air, I'm afraid. I'm like the child in the song—

> 'The wee bonnie bairn
> Sits pokin' in the ase,
> Glowerin' at the fire
> With his wee round face.
> Laughin' at the fuffin' lowe.
> What sees he there?
> Ah the bonnie bairn
> Is biggin' castles in the air.'"

Dora's voice was not powerful, but it was sweet, round, and full. She sang with much expression, and there was something very touching and sympathetic in her manner of singing. This was one of her greatest pleasures. And many a weary hour it had helped her to while away, as she lay alone in the poor little lodging, longing to work, and yet not able to go out to do so.

As the last words of her song died away, the door was rudely opened, and a small, grey-headed man

entered the room. He had a sharp, thin, face, a hooked nose, and a pair of fierce, cruel eyes. He walked up close to the sofa on which the girl lay, and glared at her angrily.

"A fine young lady, to be sure," he hissed from between his teeth. "Lying all day upon my couch, instead of working hard to pay me my rent."

Dora started up in alarm.

"Oh, please, Mr. Brimage, please do not be angry! I—I cannot work. I am so weak and"—

"But you can sing. I heard you just now. Go out and sing round the squares. You'll get money fast enough there, I'll bet."

"Oh, I could not do that!" cried Dora in horror. "Indeed, I could not."

"Bosh!" he answered contemptuously. "Beggars can't be choosers. Girls like you have no business to be proud. Better to sing than to starve."

"Yes. But pray have a little patience, Mr. Brimage," she said imploringly. "Madge has gone to look for work for me, and"—

"Work for you? A fine lot of work you'll do! Now, I tell you, what it is, my girl, if you and that sister of yours cannot pay me by to-morrow, out you go."

Dora burst into tears, and, sinking back upon the sofa, covered her face with her hands.

"To-morrow? It is impossible," she sobbed. "We have no money. We"—

"Go out and get it then. Bend your proud spirit,

or take the consequences. I have had a good offer for these apartments, and if you do not pay, why, you must go. Good evening."

And he went away, shutting the door with a bang that shook the house.

Dora raised her head and stared blankly round her. Her eyes rested on the dingy carpet, on which it was no longer possible to trace any pattern; on the faded curtains, the rickety chairs and table, the shabby cloth.

"It is poor, more than poor," she murmured. "But it is a home. And if we are turned out, where shall we go?"

She wrung her hands in despair and groaned aloud.

"Oh, Madge, Madge, how can I tell you such a thing? My poor darling, 'tis I who have brought you to this. Oh, why was I not drowned the night of the wreck? Why did I live to be a burden? But no, it shall not be." She jumped up. "That man suggested a way. I will sing in the streets. Oh, mother," and, taking out the miniature that she always wore, she gazed lovingly at the sweet face, "to think that your child should come to this! But it must be done. I'd die for Madge. And now, if I have only strength to do it, I'll sing for her."

Dora put on her hat, buttoned her jacket up tight to her throat, and put on a thick veil.

"Few know me in London. So, after all," she thought, "what does it matter? If I can manage it, it will be a good thing. But," she clung to the table, "how strange I feel!"

And, growing suddenly faint and giddy, she sank upon a chair.

"My God, help us, two lonely, unhappy girls."

The door opened again, and Mr. Brimage stood smiling upon the threshold.

Dora shivered and turned away.

"Come, now, don't look so vexed to see me. I'm worth bein' friendly to, I can tell you. I bring you good news."

"Good news?" gasped Dora.

"Yes. The best you could hear to-day, I'm thinkin'. Your rent's been paid."

The girl grew white to the lips, and trembled in every limb.

"Do not torture me so," she cried. "It may amuse you, but it is a matter of life and death to me. I am going to sing in the streets, and if I get any money you shall have it to-morrow. But leave me now. I must rest before I go out."

"Hear the girl! Can't you understand? I have been paid, more than paid, for I have received a whole quarter in advance."

Dora stared at him wildly.

"Paid? Our rent paid? Am I dreaming? or, are you really Mr. Brimage?"

"I am really Mr. Brimage, without a doubt, my dear," he answered, laughing. "And I am here to tell you that a friend has turned up to help you in your distress."

"A friend?"

"Yes. An' one you'd be glad to see, for he's a fine young fellow, with the air of a prince. A man any girl might be proud to meet."

"Then it was not Madame Garniture, or Mrs. Prim from Penelope Lodge?"

Mr. Brimage laughed loudly.

"I should think not. Those good ladies are not so generous. But he told me not to mention his name."

"He—we know no one. That is, at least"—

Dora flushed hotly, and her heart began to beat fast, her lips to tremble.

"Well, I think you'll hear from him soon. He seemed greatly pleased to learn where you lived. He an' his mother had been wantin' to know for a long time. But I fancy, for all you make such a fuss, you know very well who he is."

"Yes," said Dora simply, "I know now. It was Lord Ashfield."

"That was the very man. But, mind you, I did not tell you his name. Good night."

And Mr. Brimage made a low bow and left the room.

CHAPTER XII

PUT TO THE TEST

As Madge went thoughtfully through the streets, her heart sad, her mind filled with the all-absorbing problem of Dora and her future, she suddenly found herself face to face with Madame Garniture.

"Ah, Miss Neil, there you are," cried the dressmaker. "I've been wondering greatly about your little sister. What has become of her of late?"

"She has been ill and weak, Madame Garniture—quite unable to go to work."

"Poor child! I am sorry. She was the best and most punctual of my workers. But she'll soon be well enough to come back to us, I hope."

"I fear not. The hot room is too much for her. But I was just going to you to ask you a favour. Could you give her some work to do at home? She is well enough for that, and I am sure you could trust her."

"Of course. She makes buttonholes beautifully. I'll send her some bodies to finish to-morrow."

"Thank you, thank you. She is so anxious to earn money. This will give her fresh life. God bless you, Madame Garniture!"

And Madge's eyes were full of tears as she shook the good woman's hand.

"Well, now, I am sorry you did not come to me before, dear. I often thought of little Dora, for the child pleased me greatly. But I am so busy. I never could find time to go and see her."

"No, of course not. No one could expect you to pay visits."

"Perhaps not. But still I should have sent. However, I'll look after her now. And I tell you what, I'm going to dress a beautiful young lady for the Drawing-Room on Thursday. Her maid is young and inexperienced, so I must arrange her train. Ask your sister if she'll come with me. I may want her to hold pins and things for me, and it will amuse her."

"Yes. I am sure it would. Thank you so much."

"Very well, then, I'll call for her in a cab about eleven o'clock. Meanwhile, as this is only Tuesday, I'll send her some work."

"You are very good and kind. I don't know how to thank you."

"Nonsense, dear! I don't want any thanks. Good-bye. I'm in an awful hurry. Glad I met you. Ta, ta."

And with a smile and a wave of the hand, the kind-hearted dressmaker turned a corner and disappeared.

"What good news for my darling!" thought Madge joyfully. "I could hug you, Madame Garniture, for your kindness. And now, before going home, I

must take a peep at Belgrave Street, just to satisfy my pet that Lady Ashfield has not yet returned."

But when Madge stood opposite the house, and looked up at the windows, she uttered an exclamation of surprise and delight.

"At last! Yes, surely, Lady Ashfield must be at home. This change must mean that she has returned."

The once dingy exterior had been freshly painted. Daffodils and daisies filled the window-boxes, and the whole house was brilliantly lighted. The blinds in the dining-room had not been pulled down, and the table, beautifully decorated with choice flowers and rich silver, was plainly visible from the street.

"How delightful to sit at such a table!" sighed Madge. "Heigho! the wealthy have many things to make life pleasant. How happy we should be now, if only my sweet Dora had not been robbed. But there, a truce to such dreams. I must try if I cannot see Lady Ashfield to-night. And then, who knows what may happen?"

And, full of hope, Madge rang the bell. In an instant the hall door flew open, and two men in powdered hair stood silently waiting for her to speak.

"Can I see Lady Ashfield?" she asked nervously. "I think she would see me if you told her my name —Miss Neil."

"Yes," answered one of the men promptly. "Her ladyship will see you, I know. Will you kindly walk this way?"

Madge did as desired, and, having followed the man across a richly-carpeted hall and down a long corridor, was ushered into a small but exquisitely furnished room. There was no one there; and placing a chair near the fire, and inviting her to be seated, the footman murmured that he would tell her ladyship, and withdrew.

Left alone, Madge stood still, gazing round her in delight. Never before had she seen such a room. The colours were soft and harmonious. The furniture, which was of richly-carved ebony, toned admirably with the gorgeous embroideries that were thrown about over chairs and sofas. The cabinets were full of rare china; the walls covered with Japanese curios and pieces of old tapestry. The whole air of the place was restful. It was a room to dream, read, think in, and Madge fell into a kind of trance as she drank in the many beauties of her surroundings.

But her dream was of short duration. For presently the rustling of silken garments was heard, and Lady Ashfield swept into the room. She was dressed in a rich dinner-dress of black brocade, with flashing diamonds in her hair and round her neck. She was tall and dignified-looking, and as she came forward to greet her visitor, her face was lighted up with a gracious smile of welcome.

"My dear Miss Neil, I am so glad to see you at last! My son and I had almost despaired of ever finding you out."

"You have been away for so long, Lady Ashfield."

"True. But why did you not come and see the housekeeper? She had the names of several friends of mine who would have taken music lessons from you. They promised me they would."

"I am so sorry. But when we called, nearly two years ago, we could get but little information. The old woman at the door knew nothing of your movements."

"It was unfortunate altogether," said Lady Ashfield kindly. "For my son and I were determined to help you and watch over you. But my father's long illness and death put everything else out of my head. And now tell me, how is our friend, sweet little Dora?"

"Alas! she is far from well, Lady Ashfield," replied Madge sadly. "She has suffered much during the last two years, and her health is not good even now. She rarely leaves the house."

"Poor child! I am extremely grieved to hear such a bad account of her. I will go to see her soon. And how have you been doing, Miss Neil? Are you getting on well?"

"Not well. I work in a school all day; but the salary is small. It is not nearly sufficient for the support of two people, and lately Dora has earned nothing, poor darling."

"Would you have time to give lessons if I could get some for you?"

"I think so. Mrs. Prim promised to give me two hours a week, if I succeeded in getting other employment."

"Then I shall ask my friends and let you know at once. I have not been long in town, and do not know where everybody is."

"Thank you, Lady Ashfield, you are very good."

"Not at all. I wish I could have helped you long ago. But is there anything else I can do for you? Would you like a little immediate assistance? My purse is at your disposal."

Madge flushed hotly.

"Thank you. But I would rather not take money I"—

"Do not be proud, dear. Remember, little Dora is to be my special care. That child, by her energy and presence of mind, saved not only my life, but the life of my only son; therefore you must let me help her, save her from further trouble and privation."

"You shall do so, if necessary, Lady Ashfield. And, believe me, I am truly grateful for the offer. But pray let your kindness take the form of getting us work."

"Certainly. But Dora cannot work."

"Yes. She is clever with her needle."

"A poor way to make a living," said Lady Ashfield, shrugging her shoulders. "However, I will see what can be done. And now, is that all you will allow me to do for you?"

"No. There is something else. I want you to do me a great favour. Will you?"

"My dear, of course. You have only to ask, and, if possible, I shall grant your request. What is it?"

Madge drew a long breath and clasped her hands tightly together.

"You know the Atherstones, Lady Ashfield," she asked in a voice full of emotion, "and see them frequently?"

Lady Ashfield looked at her in surprise.

"Certainly. I know them intimately. Sir Eustace dines with me to-night."

"And Sylvia Atherstone—you know her?"

"Yes. Ever since she was a tiny child. She is the most beautiful girl and the richest heiress in London. She will make quite a sensation when she is presented next Thursday."

"And you know Anne Dane?" pursued Madge, her eyes fixed earnestly on the lady's face.

Lady Ashfield laughed, and rose to poke the fire.

"Yes. I know Anne Dane also. She is a valuable old servant, who, having rendered a great service to the family years ago, is allowed to do exactly what she pleases, which means tormenting them all, and keeping the other domestics in a state of indignation and jealousy. Oh yes, I know Anne Dane."

"Anne Dane," said Madge in a clear, firm voice, voice, "is a swindler and a cheat."

Lady Ashfield started.

"My dear Miss Neil, that is strong—I may say violent language."

"Not half strong or violent enough," cried Madge, springing to her feet, her cheeks crimson with excitement. "For she has deceived her generous master,

Sir Eustace Atherstone, and done a cruel, cruel wrong to an innocent child."

"What do you mean?"

"This, Lady Ashfield. On the night of the wreck of the *Cimbria*, Anne Dane was put into a boat with a child in her arms. From thence she was rescued, I don't know how, and went to London, not with Sylvia Atherstone, but with my sister, Dora Neil."

Lady Ashfield stared at the girl in astonishment.

"Then you mean to say"—

"That this beautiful girl, this so-called Sylvia, is a usurper; that she has no right to her name, wealth, or position, and that the real Sylvia is the sweet, delicate child who saved you and your son."

"You are—you must be either dreaming or mad."

"I am neither. What I tell you is true, absolutely true. The fair, gentle girl you know as Dora Neil is really Sylvia Atherstone."

"What proof," asked Lady Atherstone coldly, "have you of this?"

Madge cast down her eyes, her colour went and came.

"Alas! none."

Lady Ashfield gave a sigh of relief.

"I thought so."

"But if I could see Anne Dane for a moment, cried the girl vehemently,—"if I could bring her face to face"—

"My dear young lady, you talk nonsense. Without proof, and strong proof, no one would ever believe

such a story. Take my advice, and put this silly fancy out of your head. It can only do harm to you, Dora, and even, perhaps, in a small way to Miss Atherstone."

"Silly fancy?" gasped Madge, clasping her hands and raising her eyes appealingly to Lady Ashfield's face. "Oh, it is no fancy. It is truth, pure, simple truth."

"But even supposing it were true," replied Lady Ashfield, wondering at the girl's apparent honesty and extreme earnestness, "you say you have no proof, and"—

"We have the portrait of Sylvia's mother, a miniature hung round her neck by her father as he bade her good-bye on board that ill-fated vessel, the *Cimbria*. She's so like that!"

"But no one here ever saw Mrs. Atherstone. She was an Australian. He married her out there, and"—

"But Mr. Atherstone himself—he would know."

"Mr. Atherstone is still in Australia. Your miniature could not prove anything."

"Then I must see Anne Dane. Let us come upon her unexpectedly, and, in the presence of witnesses, produce Dora and the miniature, and she will be surprised, terrified, and will surely acknowledge the wicked fraud she has been carrying on for so many years."

"My dear Miss Neil, pray calm yourself. I do not—I cannot believe your story. You are labouring under some strange, some wild delusion."

Madge bent her head upon her hands and uttered a deep groan.

"Oh, God," she murmured, "help me to reveal the truth, to restore this poor child to her home and friends." Then, looking up imploringly, her eyes full of tears, "Lady Ashfield, pray, pray help me. You can, you"—

"I am quite willing to help you."

Madge sprang forward with a cry of joy.

Lady Ashfield held up her hand.

"Do not misunderstand me, please, Miss Neil. I am ready and willing to do what I can to help you to earn money, and support yourself and your sister. But I do not, I tell you honestly, believe your story. And if I did, nothing would ever induce me to help you in any way to accomplish the end you have in view. Not for the world would I be the means of plunging my dear old friend, Sir Eustace, into such a sea of trouble, as the very suggestion of such a thing would bring upon him."

"Will you give me Anne Dane's address?"

"Certainly not. That would surely assist you, and cause much misery. No, no, Miss Neil; leave Anne Dane in peace, and forget this foolish notion. You have an honest face, and seem much in earnest. So I cannot believe you have willingly invented this story of the wreck. But I feel sure that you are suffering from a delusion, a hallucination, which has probably grown stronger as the years have gone on. But"—

Madge choked back her tears, and, drawing her slight figure up to its fullest height, said coldly—

"I am sorry to interrupt you, Lady Ashfield. But I must ask you to say no more. You do not believe my story. You treat me as a madwoman, and therefore I beg that you will not take any further trouble for me. You cannot, it would be impossible for you, to recommend a liar or a lunatic to your friends. So pray forget that I exist. I regret that I should have taken up so much of your valuable time, and I will now wish you good evening."

And with burning cheeks, her head held proudly erect, Madge walked quickly from the room.

"What strange infatuation!" cried Lady Ashfield, as the door closed upon her visitor. "The girl's mind must have suffered severely from the shock of the wreck. But I trust that this silly nonsense may never reach Sylvia's ears, nor Sir Eustace's. What pain, what trouble it would cause, false though it be. Intense misery, I am sure. But, dear me, how late it is! And I have not quite finished my dressing. I really feel much upset by this strange scene. I must try and compose myself before my guests arrive."

And, sighing heavily, Lady Ashfield left her boudoir and hurried upstairs to complete her toilet.

CHAPTER XIII

LORD ASHFIELD IS MUCH PUZZLED

As Lady Ashfield seated herself before the glass in her dressing-room, and called to her maid to bring her some Eau de Cologne, a sharp knock was heard on the door, and a cheery voice said gaily—

"May I come in, mother?"

Lady Ashfield smiled. All her cares were forgotten in an instant. In the presence of her son, her idol, she knew no sorrow.

"Certainly, dear boy," she cried; "come in, by all means."

Lord Ashfield was in radiant spirits, and his eyes were full of happiness as he kissed his mother.

"What, not dressed yet, Ashfield? It is nearly dinner-time."

"Yes," he answered, throwing himself into an arm-chair, "I am a bit late. But I don't take long to dress. I'll be ready in time, mater mine."

"I hope so. Sylvia dines with us to-night."

"Does she? That's right. But, mother, I have such a splendid piece of news for you."

"Indeed, Ashfield?" she replied absently, and

bending forward to arrange the diamond pins in her hair. "What is it?"

"Something you have been wishing should happen this ever so long has come off at last. Guess what it is, mother."

"I never could guess anything, dear boy. Perhaps one of your favourites has won a race."

Ashfield laughed heartily.

"Now, did you ever wish that to happen, mother?"

"Not exactly. But really, dear, you should go and dress. This news will keep."

"Oh no, it won't. But here goes. Well, after long searching and many unsuccessful inquiries, I have at last found the Neils, Dora and her sister."

"Indeed?" said Lady Ashfield coldly; "that is quite an unexpected event. And how did it happen?"

Ashfield looked at her curiously.

"Why, mother, how calmly you take my news! You don't seem much pleased. I thought you would be delighted."

She laughed nervously, and looked about impatiently for some missing article.

"Sarah is so careless. I can't find my ruby ring. Ah, here it is. Yes, yes, of course I am glad, dear. But is it necessary to be quite as excited as you are? I thought we should probably find them some day. Where did you meet them?"

"I did not meet them. But I came to find them in rather a curious fashion. You remember Paul Vyner?"

"What, the artist?"

Lady Ashfield started round as she asked this question, her face full of interest.

"Yes. He is an artist. One of the best fellows"—

"You need not tell me his perfections," she said stiffly, and turning back to her glass. "But I thought he was in America."

"Was. But is in London. I've been sitting to him for my portrait."

"What folly!"

"Folly? My dear mother, why should it be folly?"

"Because you know, we should keep that young man at as great a distance as possible, Ashfield."

"My dear mother, I am sorry to be obliged to contradict you. But I really know nothing of the kind."

"Have you then forgotten all that happened before he went away?"

"No, mother. I remember perfectly well. I remember how Sir Eustace Atherstone educated him, took him to Italy, treated him in every way like his son, till one day he discovered, through Paul's own manly confession, that he loved his grand-daughter, Sylvia, and that he then cast him off, allowing him to shift for himself, refusing to see or help him. This, of course, affects the Atherstones, but what it has to do with us I cannot see."

"You are very dense, my son, or surely you would see that it would be better to keep this young man at a distance, just at present. You know what my hopes are where Sylvia is concerned; and—and this hand-

some artist, with his wrongs and grievances, may prove a formidable rival."

Lord Ashfield sprang to his feet and took two or three turns up and down the room. His face was flushed, his eyes full of anger. But presently he grew calmer, and, coming closer to his mother, he laid his hand affectionately on her shoulder, and bent to kiss her cheek.

"Mother mine," he said gently, "you must not build castles in the air. You have no right to form any hopes, or speculate in any way, about my future—or Sylvia's. *That* is in our hands. *You,* my mother, must not interfere."

"Ashfield!"

"I mean it, mother." He smiled playfully. "I'll have no matchmaking. I'll gang my own gate, as the Scotsman says, and marry who and when I please. But you may rest assured that I'll never ask you to receive a daughter-in-law who is not in every sense a lady."

Lady Ashfield looked up lovingly into his handsome, honest face.

"My son, I never doubted that. But I did hope"—

He held up a warning finger.

"That is just what I object to. You must not hope anything. At least, you must not talk of your hopes."

"Very well. I'll promise that."

"Thanks. That is something gained. And now, as to Vyner."

His mother moved impatiently on her chair.

"I take no interest in him, I assure you."

"My dear mother, how unjust you great ladies can be! If Paul were an earl or a duke, you would not forbid me to cultivate his acquaintance lest, perhaps, he might become a rival."

Lady Ashfield frowned.

"That is quite a different thing. It is preposterous that a poor, struggling artist should dare to aspire to Miss Atherstone's hand."

"And yet Miss Atherstone will have money enough for"—

"Ashfield, you annoy me exceedingly. These new radical ideas of yours are atrocious. If a man be good, honest, and clever, you care nothing for family or wealth; all men are equal in your eyes."

Ashfield laughed good-humouredly.

"Not quite, mother dear. The good, clever men are infinitely superior to the mere men of family or wealth. But pray forgive me if I annoyed you. I did not wish to do so, I assure you. And now, let us forget that the Atherstones ever knew Vyner, and remember only that he has done us a great service, and that we owe him a debt of gratitude."

"How so, pray?"

"Because through him I discovered the Neils."

Lady Ashfield's mouth was set in cold, hard lines.

"Indeed?" she said icily. "That was a great service, truly."

"A very great one, mother, and I cannot tell you how thankful I feel. This morning I was in bad

spirits. I thought we should never discover them. And on entering Vyner's studio, he remarked upon my miserable expression. I told him the story without mentioning the Neils' names, never imagining for an instant that he could assist me. The good fellow was full of sympathy. 'But,' he said, 'you must cheer up. I could not paint such a doleful countenance. Come into my room and look at my treasures. They may enliven you somewhat.'"

"He led me into a little sanctum hung round with all kinds of curios. But what attracted me, fixed my attention at once, were two small pictures—two of the most lovely heads that I have ever seen in my life. One had a cloud of rich auburn hair, large, luminous, dark eyes, and"—

"Sylvia! What audacity!"

"Audacity, mother? To paint the friend of his boyhood, his almost sister for fourteen long years! One could hardly call that audacity. However, that we may discuss another time. I want to finish my story. Side by side with this beautiful painting was another. Oh, mother, had you seen it, your heart, which this evening seems like ice, must have melted. It resembles the head of an angel, fair and pure. Masses of golden hair clustering round a marble brow, eyes of the deepest, darkest blue; but over all an air of sadness and melancholy not natural in one so young. Vyner saw my admiration, and did not speak for a moment, unwilling to disturb my reverie.

"'Are they not a striking contrast?' he asked at last.

"I nodded. I could not speak. I felt on the verge of tears.

"'And their lives,' he continued, 'are as great a contrast as their looks. More, I should say, for though their faces are different, they are both beautiful; whilst their lives—alas! there, indeed, is the contrast. One surrounded with every luxury, the other plunged in the most dire poverty and want.'

"'Is that true?' I cried. 'Oh, Vyner, I know them both. One is Miss Atherstone, the beautiful heiress. The other is'—

"'Little Dora Neil, the dressmaker's apprentice.'

"'Where did you find her?'

"'Find her? My dear Ashfield, she is close to us. She and her sister live in the rooms just over these.'

"I seized his hand and shook it warmly. Yes, mother, you may shake your head, but I did not take the discovery as quietly as you do. I felt overjoyed, and longed to rush upstairs to see them at once. But Vyner restrained me. 'Dora was ill. Her sister was out', he said, so it would be better to wait. I might startle her, if I went up to her then. Suddenly we heard the sound of singing. 'That is Dora,' cried Vyner. 'She has such a sweet, plaintive voice. Poor child! her life is hard for one so frail and delicate.'

"'She shall lead it no longer,' I said. 'That is the girl I was so anxious to find, Vyner. And she, small and fragile as she is, once saved my life and my mother's. For years we have lost sight of her, neglected her. But, thank God, I have found her,

and I will now see that she wants for nothing. I must speak to her to-night.' And, heedless of Vyner's remonstrances, I rushed upstairs. On the landing I could distinctly hear her song, that quaint little Scotch one about 'castles in the air.' Unwilling to interrupt her, I stood still and listened. Suddenly, a rough, fierce-looking old man brushed quickly past me, and, muttering, 'I'll make her sing,' burst unceremoniously into her room. The song ceased abruptly, and the intruder's voice fell on my ear. His tone was insolent, his language threatening. Then in reply came Dora's sweet, pleading words. And oh, mother, it would have made you weep to hear her sobs and heart-rending prayer for mercy. But the landlord was obdurate. Nothing would move him. He must have his rent, or she and her sister must leave his house next day. And then he came away, leaving her, I am sure, plunged in an agony of grief. But, thank God, I was there to stay his cruel hand. As he walked downstairs, I met him, and there and then paid the small amount of rent that was due. He returned to tell our little friend the good news, but under promise not to reveal my name, and I came off to tell you that I had at last discovered her."

"It is strange," said Lady Ashfield, "that I too have learned her whereabouts this very evening, though in a less romantic fashion. Her sister has called upon me at last."

"Mother! Why did you not tell me so at once? Are you not delighted?"

"My dear Ashfield, how excitable you are! Finding these girls seems to have turned your head."

"Not quite, mother. But I confess it has given me great pleasure. Your manner, however, puzzles me immensely. Did you not like Miss Madge?"

"No, not much. Her words—her—in fact, I was disappointed in her."

Ashfield looked what he felt—deeply pained.

"I am sorry for that. Dora's sister should be charming."

"She is not, or says she is not, the girl's sister after all," rose to Lady Ashfield's lips. But she stopped abruptly. "Why tell Ashfield this mad story?" she thought. "It is nonsense, and I hope he may never hear it. He shall certainly not do so from me."

"Well?" he inquired; "she is not what?"

"At all like Dora. She is dark and strong—a tall, rather good-looking young woman, but lacking the extreme refinement of her little sister."

"But she is a lady?" he questioned anxiously. "She must be that."

Lady Ashfield flushed. It was unpleasant to be catechised so persistently about a person who had annoyed her so much. She did not care to see her son take such an interest in these Neils. And yet, such is the perversity of men, she knew that, did she but attempt to disparage Madge, it would only increase that interest, and make him more anxious than ever to look after her and her sister.

"Yes," she admitted reluctantly, after a slight pause. "She is a lady, but very proud; and she did not seem to be as poor as you think her."

"Ah, that shows me how noble she is. She did not care to parade her poverty to a stranger. I like that spirit," he cried warmly. "But, of course, you promised to get her lessons, and help her all you could."

"Yes. But she drew herself up proudly and declined my help."

"Mother! you must have offended her. You must apologise, and insist on helping her."

Something in Lord Ashfield's manner and words stung his mother to anger; and, forgetting her usual caution in her wrath, she replied indignantly—

"I most certainly decline to do anything of the kind. Miss Madge refused my help, and I have no intention of pressing my services upon her. And now, Ashfield, go and dress for dinner. We have discussed this matter long enough. Our guests may arrive in a few moments."

"One word, mother. Will you forget your quarrel with Madge, and send for her again?"

"No, I cannot promise to do that," she answered stiffly. "My maid shall go and see Dora to-morrow, and take her a few delicacies."

"I did not ask you to help them in that way," he said in a tone of grave displeasure. "It is surely making the girl a poor return for her brave conduct, doling out charity to her by the hands of your maid."

"You must allow me to be a judge of what is right, Ashfield. I flatter myself I know more about these matters than you."

"Perhaps so. But I must confess I am much puzzled by your conduct. You are not acting as I expected you would, when we discovered these girls. But now I must go and dress."

And for the first time for many years, Lord Ashfield left his mother's presence with a heavy cloud upon his brow.

CHAPTER XIV

WHO IS SYLVIA?

After an absence of many years, Sir Eustace Atherstone had at last made up his mind to spend the season in London. Immediately, after the arrival of his granddaughter and her nurse, he had retired to his country seat, where he remained till the girl was sixteen. Then, for her sake, he suddenly renounced the life he loved, and went abroad. For Sylvia was his first, his constant thought, and her happiness the principal object of his existence. From the moment that he had received her from Anne Dane, a poor little mite, just rescued from a watery grave, he had surrounded her with everything that love or wealth could imagine or suggest.

Up to the age of sixteen the girl had been instructed in all the important branches of education by the best teachers England could produce. Then, all at once, it dawned upon the young lady that she knew absolutely nothing of the world—that she had never heard good music, or seen any of the fine pictures and sculpture that she had read so much about—that her French and German were weak, her

Italian weaker. She mentioned these facts one day, somewhat plaintively, to her grandfather. And he, without a thought for himself or his probable discomfort in foreign lands, instantly resolved that they should travel, and that Sylvia should thus have every opportunity for learning modern languages and generally improving her mind.

For two years they wandered about from place to place, staying six months here, and three there, till at last their time was up, and Sylvia was eighteen, and her entrance into society could no longer be delayed. Then they turned their faces homewards, and arrived in London a week or so before the Drawing-Room, at which Miss Atherstone was to be presented by Lady Ashfield.

On the morning of the day upon which this important event in his grand-daughter's life was to occur, Sir Eustace sat alone in his handsome library. Round about him on the table were books, papers, and letters. But he was not reading. He seemed lost in thought. And to judge by the expression of his face, there was a good deal of sadness mixed up with his reflections.

"Yes," he murmured half aloud, "I miss him. Here, in this room, where Paul as a little boy used to sit in the old, old days, poring over some big book, and looking up with a smile when I asked him a question, I miss him sadly. In foreign lands, amidst fresh scenes, and in the first burst of indignation at his folly, I fancied I did not care; but I find I do—

for very dear was that lad to me, after all. Poor Paul Vyner, with his bright face and his warm, enthusiastic nature. Why, oh, why did I send him from me? and yet I could not help it. It was necessary for Sylvia's sake. So what matter how I, how he suffers, if she be happy, as she must—as she shall be. But how strange it seems that those I love are all forced for some reason or other to leave me! First, my son, George; then my wife and other children by death; then Paul; and now, who knows, perhaps, I may one day lose Sylvia, my pet, my treasure. Such a loss would kill me, and yet after this I may not be allowed to keep her long. Once presented, says Lady Ashfield, she must marry. Paul was banished because he loved her—my poor Paul! And now, who knows what plot is being hatched, what conspiracy is on foot to rob me of her? Only last night Lady Ashfield hinted something darkly, asked strange questions about my darling's fortune, and wanted to know if any change would ever be possible in my manner towards her, no matter what she did or became. What she meant I can't imagine. As if any earthly thing could alter my love for my dearest child. Why, even if—but here she comes. I declare the fire is nearly out. How stupid of me not to pay it more attention!"

Sir Eustace seized the poker and stirred the fire to a blaze. Then drawing over an arm-chair, he sank into it with a sigh.

The door opened slightly, and a merry voice called out—

"May I come in, grandpapa? Madame Garniture promised to come early to help to dress me, as Désirée is rather innocent in the arrangement of Court trains. But she has not arrived, and I am tired of sitting upstairs alone. I am in an unfinished state. But still"—

"Come in, love, come in!" he cried. "My sweet Sylvia is welcome in any state. Her sunny face is just what I want to see."

"You dear old darling!" said Sylvia; and, tripping up to her grandfather's chair, she gave him a loving kiss.

"Unfinished?" he exclaimed. "Why, my dear, you look lovely. That dress will be the prettiest in the Palace. Is it a new style of Court dress? In my day they were not that shape."

Sylvia burst into a peal of merry laughter.

"You dear, good, stupid old grandfather! You don't imagine I could go to Court in this? Why, it's only a tea-gown."

"Pink silk, cream lace, hair puffed and curled on the top of your little head. My child, you never wore such finery before."

"No. But you know I am out now. So, of course, my dresses are all quite different. And my hair is done up, ready for my feathers. Désirée does hair beautifully. But wait till you see me fully equipped for Court, grandpapa; you'll not know me, I'm sure. Feathers and veil, puffs and flowers, train ever so many miles—no, I mean yards long. I declare, dear,

I shall feel like a cockatoo. And then—oh, pity my fate!—I've got to go out in this nipping wind in a low body and short sleeves."

"I would not do it."

"But it's one of Her Majesty's commands. Surely my dear, loyal, aristocratic Sir Eustace would not disobey his Queen?"

"Sylvia, you are frivolous."

"I am, grandpapa, I am. But if I were not, I should be cross. Listen, dear, and I will tell you my woes."

And, drawing over a low stool, she seated herself at his feet.

"Woes, my pet? Surely you have nothing to trouble you?" And he laid his hand caressingly upon her head.

The girl turned the sunniest of faces towards him, then, heaving a deep sigh, replied—

"Oh, such a number!"

Her manner and air were so comical, her whole expression so full of anything like sorrow, that Sir Eustace burst out laughing.

"You naughty puss! As if you knew what trouble meant."

"You are greatly mistaken," she said, pouting. "I know well what it means, for I have had many worries and troubles since—since I came out."

"But you are not out till you are presented."

"True. Well, then, troubles that come from the preparation necessary before taking the great step. In

the first place, Lady Ashfield is much annoyed because I would not do what she told me, and go to Madame Irma for my Court dress."

"And why didn't you?"

"My dear Sir Eustace," she said solemnly, "Miss Atherstone may bestow her patronage where she chooses."

Her grandfather smiled.

"To be sure. And where, then, did Miss Atherstone bestow it?"

"On dear old Garniture, of course. She has made my dresses—not quite since I was able to walk, but still for a very long time, and I was not going to desert her, just when she would most enjoy dressing me, merely because Irma is the fashion."

"Well, I don't suppose Lady Ashfield cared."

"Oh, but she did. And that is one of my troubles. She was very proud and cross, and that made me more determined than ever—for you know I have a will of my own, dear."

"Most certainly you have, my pet. A more obstinate little person I never met."

"Not with you, grandpapa, not with you. I'd do anything you asked me."

She laid her cheek caressingly against his hand, and raised her large, lustrous eyes lovingly to his.

"I gave up Paul, dear, foolish Paul, because you wished it. You have not forgotten that, grandpapa?"

And Sylvia's sweet face grew crimson, and the sensitive mouth quivered ominously.

"You did, my darling. You were ever gentle and obedient. To-day you go forth into the world, and others more eligible than Paul may see you, and want you. Lord Ashfield, for instance. His mother hinted broadly last night."

"Lord Ashfield shall never steal me from you. Do not be afraid. And do not pay attention to his mother's hints. In this matter she will find me quite as obstinate as where Madame Garniture was concerned."

"But someone is sure to come and carry you off, my pet. There is a strange feeling of terror over me to-day, Sylvia, that I cannot understand. It may be that your father"—

"My father! Oh, grandpapa, you could not surely be jealous of him. Poor dear papa, who has not seen me for years and years, not since I was a tiny child. My darling, he shall not divide us, I know. He'll come home and widen our circle—increase our family. Instead of separating us, he will draw us more together and strengthen our love."

"My dear, sweet child, would that my love for you were not so selfish! For years I have longed for your father to return; but now, as the hour approaches, I dread it, lest he should take from me one iota of my little grand-daughter's heart."

"He shall never do that. But tell me, have you heard from papa lately?"

"This morning. He expects to be home in about six months."

Sylvia clapped her hands; her face shone with joy.

"What glorious news! How glad I shall be to see him! You don't mind me saying that, dearest?"

"No, my pet. Such pleasure is natural, and shows what a loving child you are."

The girl did not speak for a moment, and seemed in deep thought.

"Grandpapa," she said presently, "I wonder if papa would know me if he were to meet me, and no one told him I was his child. Am I much changed since I came to you?"

He examined her critically, his eyes full of loving admiration as they dwelt upon her.

"You were small then. You are now tall and graceful," he said, smiling. "Your dark eyes are larger and darker, but your hair, complexion, and tiny mouth are almost the same. You were a lovely baby; you are a beautiful girl."

She jumped up, laid her arms about his neck, and kissed him with a tender love in her eyes.

"Dear old flatterer," she whispered, "do you wish to make me vain?"

"No. I don't think that would be possible."

Sylvia laughed and blushed, and returned to her stool.

"Then you think papa would know me?"

"That I can hardly tell. And yet I think he would. For truly you are but little changed since I first saw you. But still, I do not quite understand. Either he has forgotten what you were like, or the sea

journey worked a considerable difference in your health and general appearance. I will let you hear what he has written about you."

And, taking a letter from the table, Sir Eustace began to read.

"I wonder what my darling is like now. I always think of her as the small, delicate baby with little pale, fair cheeks, that clung to me so lovingly as I bade her good-bye."

"Now, when I met you at Gravesend, Sylvia," said Sir Eustace, "you were as rosy as possible, as strong a child as ever lived."

"The sea air had, of course, tanned my skin and made me look healthy," answered Sylvia decidedly. "And I daresay papa has forgotten. It is not easy to remember a baby's face. But if he looked at my last likeness, he'd see pretty well what I am like; everyone said it was capital."

"Yes. But listen, dear, to what he says." And Sir Eustace continued the letter.

"You cannot imagine how I long to see her, especially now, as I know she is grown up, and that I have made up my mind to go home soon. My thoughts are full of my daughter. It is strange that none of the photos you mentioned sending ever reached me. I probably missed them through wandering about so much. But I am just as glad, I never saw them, for now she will burst upon me in all her beauty. For you tell me she is beautiful. Is she like my sweet wife, I wonder? But, of course, you do not know

that, since you never saw her, and the miniature I sent was lost in the wreck. However, it matters little who she is like. She is my own beloved daughter, and as such she is inexpressibly dear. God bless her and you."

Sylvia's were full of tears, and, taking her father's letter from the old man's hand, she pressed it to her lips.

"Poor papa, how full of love and longing is your letter! But why has he stayed away from us all these years, grandpapa?"

"Why? So you may ask. He, the heir to my name and rich estates. But he loved a wandering life, and could not bear the trammels of society. Now, as he grows older, he longs for home and his daughter's love."

"And he shall have both. Grandpapa, we must be very good and kind to him, you and I. But I wonder, am I at all like my dead mother?"

"No, dearest, I think not, unless in expression. For she was small and fair. George told me so frequently in the first days of his married life. She was a fragile creature, with golden hair, and large, childlike blue eyes."

Sylvia sighed.

"That is not at all like me. Dear little mother! Who am I like, grandpapa? Do I remind you of papa?"

And she glanced at the large portrait of George Atherstone, as a lad of nineteen, that hung over the mantelpiece.

"No, dear. You are not like any member of our family. You are an original Sylvia, perfectly unique in your own peculiar way."

The girl laughed and looked up roguishly into his face.

"Perhaps I am a changeling?"

"I should not be at all surprised," he cried, pinching her cheek. "Brought to us by the fairies, endowed with all their most precious gifts and graces."

How they jested, these two. Yet had they but guessed how near the truth they were, what cruel sorrow would have filled their hearts!

"Just so, grandpapa," cried Sylvia gaily. "That sounds very pretty. And now I must really go, and finish my toilet. If I am not ready very soon, Lady Ashfield may have to wait, and"—

"Madame Garniture has gone to your room, Miss Atherstone," said the footman, opening the door.

"I am glad. Good-bye, grandpapa." And she tripped off upstairs.

On the first landing hung an old-fashioned mirror, framed in some of Grinling Gibbons' exquisite carving. In this Sylvia caught sight of her own face as she passed.

"Not at all like my mother. Alas! no. 'A fragile creature with golden hair.' Ah!"

Sylvia started and uttered a cry of surprise. Seated on a chair just outside her dressing-room door was a girl of about her own age, small, slight, and

fair, with a mass of pure golden hair, and large, sad blue eyes.

"Exactly what my darling might have been at eighteen. Poor little dead mother!" she thought, as she looked at the stranger. "She just suits the picture I have made of her in my mind."

Dorothy Neil (for it was she) stood up politely as the young lady approached.

"Why are you waiting here?" asked Sylvia gently.

"I am waiting for Madame Garniture," the girl replied, with a faint blush. "I am one of her workers, and came to carry your veil and feathers."

"You look tired. This is not a comfortable seat. Come into my sitting-room and rest whilst you wait."

Greatly touched at such kind attention, Dora followed Sylvia into a pretty boudoir, and gladly accepted the luxurious arm-chair that she was invited to occupy.

"Here is an amusing book to read," said Sylvia. "And Désirée must fetch you a glass of wine."

"Please do not trouble about me," cried Dora. "I do not care for wine."

"But you must have some, and a little cake. It will do you good. I am sorry I must go and dress. I should like so much to talk to you. You have a sweet face, and"—

"Miss Atherstone."

"Coming, Madame Garniture. Good-bye. I must go."

Sylvia vanished into her dressing-room, and Dora was left alone. For some minutes she looked about her, wondering vaguely in whose house she could be, who the kind young lady was, and if she should ever see her again. She was very tired and very weak, and presently the book she held slipped from her fingers, her eyes closed, and she fell asleep.

In a short time—very short it appeared to her—she heard the running to and fro of many feet, the murmur of voices, and her own name repeated loudly in tones of evident displeasure.

She started up and ran out upon the stairs. Here she found Madame Garniture and the French maid, Désirée.

"Well, upon my word, this is nice conduct in a strange house!" cried the dressmaker angrily. "Where have you been hiding, I'd like to know?"

"I was not hiding," replied Dora, flushing painfully. "I was sitting in the room where the young lady left me."

"Oh, dear, of course," said Désirée. "Miss Atherstone told me you were in the boudoir. Did you get the wine?"

"No. But"—

Dora gasped. She grew suddenly pale.

"Then you shall have it now," cried the maid. "I'll go for it at once." And away she went.

"Madame Garniture," asked Dora, with trembling lips, "do you—will you tell me who is that beautiful girl you came to dress for the Drawing-Room?"

"Certainly. But I thought you knew, child. She is Miss Sylvia Atherstone, the greatest heiress, and loveliest young lady in all London."

Dora's head spun round; she suddenly felt faint and giddy, and she clung to the banisters for support.

"Sylvia Atherstone?" she murmured. "Are you sure?"

Madame Garniture laughed scornfully.

"Why, I've made Miss Atherstone's dresses for the last seven years, and very proud I am of the honour. Hers is a figure to do a dressmaker credit—straight, graceful, and shapely. She is a true aristocrat, is Miss Atherstone—a real lady to the very tips of her fingers. But come, dear, let us go home. You don't seem well."

Dora passed her hand across her forehead.

"I am dazed—bewildered. I know not what may happen now. Sylvia Atherstone at last! So good, so beautiful, so"—

Madame Garniture looked at the girl in astonishment.

"My dear, you are half asleep. This visit appears to have upset you. But come along. I have a cab ready this half-hour."

And, without waiting for Désirée to appear with the wine, she hurried Dora into a hansom and drove away.

"Take my advice and lie down," she said, as she dropped the girl at the corner of the street in which she lived. "You want a little rest."

"Yes, thank you," answered Dora dreamily. "Perhaps I do."

"Poor child!" murmured the dressmaker. "She looks somehow as if she had seen a ghost. What a delicate creature she is. Her life will not be long, I fancy. But maybe it's just as well, for she has not much of a future before her."

CHAPTER XV

LADY ASHFIELD MAKES UP HER MIND

By all who saw her on the day of the Drawing-Room, Sylvia Atherstone was much admired, and universally allowed to be the handsomest and most distinguished-looking of all the fair *débutantes*. She was, declared these judges of female beauty, the loveliest girl they had ever seen, and worthy in every respect of the good old name she bore.

But of all this admiration, Sylvia was calmly unconscious. She was pleased when the ordeal of making her curtsey to the Queen was over, and rejoiced to think that she had passed through it without betraying any undue nervousness or agitation. But more than this she did not care. For, as Sir Eustace had said, she was not vain, nor likely to become so. Her mind was of too high an order to admit of such a petty vice as mere personal vanity. So she troubled herself but little as to what anyone might say about her looks or bearing on the day of her presentation.

But if Sylvia were indifferent as to the judgment pronounced upon her by society, on her first appear-

ance at Court, Lady Ashfield was keenly anxious upon the subject. For some time she had been tortured with doubts as to the truth of Madge Neil's story. The horrible idea that Sylvia might, after all, be the daughter of poor, insignificant people had kept her awake at night, and unhappy by day. The dream of her life had been to see this beautiful heiress married to her only son, Charles, Lord Ashfield. But as the dreadful possibility that she might not be, after all, what she seemed, rose up before her, she resolved to be cautious—not to push on the marriage till this story had been carefully looked into, and settled one way or another for ever. Sylvia Atherstone, with her large fortune and blue blood, would be a wife fit in every respect for Lord Ashfield; but the same girl, good and beautiful though she might be, without money or family, should never wed with son of hers.

Lord Ashfield was full of what his mother was pleased to call "Radical ideas." He professed a decided contempt for persons whose only boast was their pedigree and ancient family. He admired genius, courting the society of those who had risen by their own talents and industry, rather than that of gentlemen who counted kings and crusaders amongst their ancestors. This strange taste, thought Lady Ashfield, was the sign of some terrible warp in his nature, and would surely lead him into mischief—perhaps be the cause of his marrying someone much beneath him in station. But against this, she was determined to

guard. And until Madge appeared upon the scene, she had considered Sylvia the one only girl whom she would be pleased to welcome as her daughter-in-law. And even after she had listened to the story of the wreck, and heard of the declared substitution of one child for another, she was still true to Sylvia. She refused to believe Madge's statement, resolved to treat it as a barefaced invention, and showed Lord Ashfield, as plainly as she dared, that she wished him to marry Sylvia Atherstone, grand-daughter of her best and oldest friend.

But then, an awful fear took possession of her. What if this tale were found to be true? And she trembled lest she had already gone too far, had urged this marriage too earnestly upon her son. Then came the recollection of the approaching Drawing-Room. If she presented Sylvia, she was in a manner responsible for her. Hitherto she had not felt uneasy. But now! What if this girl, whose beauty and elegance she had lauded to her friends, should prove to be a nobody? What if she were found less lovely, less aristocratic-looking than she had imagined her to be, wanting in the many points that show birth and family? What if this should be the verdict pronounced upon Sylvia on her first appearance in the world? How she would be laughed at for her ignorance and simplicity.

So as the day of the presentation drew near, her soul was torn with anxiety.

At last the ominous hour arrived, and Lady

Ashfield swept through the stately rooms of Buckingham Palace, with Sylvia by her side.

Suddenly, her doubts melted away. She became completely reassured. All around, she saw looks of admiration and approval, and she gazed at her companion, full of a growing and fixed belief that she was certainly Sir Eustace Atherstone's grand-daughter. It was not possible to think otherwise. The tall, slim figure; the graceful, dignified carriage; the well-shaped head; the dazzlingly beautiful, yet high-bred face; the perfectly easy, unconscious manner of the young girl, could only belong to one of good—of noble birth. So, there and then, Lady Ashfield's mind was definitely made up. This wild story that had filled her with terror was utterly false, and was doubtless concocted for the purpose of extracting money from her. She would see Madge again soon, and buy a promise of silence from her, even though it should cost her several hundreds. Thus all fear of trouble on that score would be speedily disposed of, and Sylvia should marry Lord Ashfield before the end of the season.

"Your grand-daughter has had a great triumph, Sir Eustace," said Lady Ashfield sweetly, as she watched the girl move gracefully about amongst the many friends who had come to see her on her return from the Drawing-Room. "She was universally admired, I assure you. And really I do not wonder. I consider her quite perfect."

Sir Eustace smiled, and his eyes rested lovingly on his darling's face.

"Indeed?" he said; "and was it necessary she should put on a train several yards long before you could find that out? I always knew she was perfect."

"You have had advantages I did not enjoy. But, even so, had I been in your place, I would have mistrusted my own judgment a little. One never knows what the opinion of society may be, and that is the important point, Sir Eustace."

"Not a bit of it. I don't care one jot what society says or thinks, so long as I know that my Sylvia's heart is in the right place. And I have only to look in her bonnie eyes to know that."

"True. But society will not trouble much about that. Hearts go for very little, I assure you. However, Sylvia is a success, and I congratulate you. And now I must run away. I have two other teas to go to on my way home."

"It was most kind of you to come to us," said Sir Eustace, as he gave her his arm downstairs. "You are very good to my child, and I thank you a thousand times."

"My dear friend, I require no thanks. Remember, I look upon Sylvia as my daughter. You know I hope to call her so one day."

"Yes," he answered gravely; "and I feel deeply complimented that you should. But pray do not forget that *l'homme propose, et Dieu dispose.* My Sylvia shall do as she pleases. I sent away Paul Vyner by your advice, but I will not urge her to marry Lord Ashfield."

"Of course not—I never thought of such a thing. Still I like you to know what I feel about the dear child."

"You are very kind — a true friend to us both. And Ashfield is an extremely fine young fellow. But I am selfish in my love. I want to keep my darling to myself."

Lady Ashfield laughed.

"That you shall not be allowed to do long, I promise you. But good-night. We meet this evening at the Trehernes', I suppose?"

"Yes, Sylvia and I are dining there."

"Then *au revoir*, Sir Eustace, *au revoir*."

And, stepping into her carriage, Lady Ashfield drove away.

"Poor old man! How wrapt up in that girl he is!" she cried, as she went along. "This story of Madge Neil's would kill him, I believe. But he shall never hear it, if I can prevent it. It is only the raving of a madwoman. But still it would give intense pain and worry. However, I'll soon put an end to it, and Ashfield shall marry Sylvia—I am determined he shall."

But for some days Lady Ashfield was busy, she had many people to visit, many places to go to. And though anxious to see Madge and silence her for ever, she dreaded the interview, and postponed it from hour to hour. Thus the time passed, and, notwithstanding the good resolutions she had made, she neither saw nor heard anything of the Neils. Lord Ashfield did

not mention them again; and his manner to his mother was kind and affectionate as before.

"He has forgotten them," she said to herself; "so much the better. I may take my own time and go to Madge when it suits me. There is no hurry. But I really expected that Ashfield would have made more fuss about my visiting those girls. However, I am pleased that he does not torment me. He seems now as though he did not care whether I went or not."

But in this Lady Ashfield was mistaken. Her son was far from having forgotten the Neils. He remembered them only too well; and not a day passed without his sending fruit, flowers, or books to Dora. True, they were not sent in his name, nor did he visit the girls in their lodgings. But that was because he felt a delicacy in doing so, since his mother held aloof. He was determined to help them more substantially, as soon as he possibly could. This, however, was a difficult thing to do, and gave him many hours of anxious thought. The sisters were ladies, he felt, in spite of their poor surroundings; and from what he had seen of Dorothy, he was sure she would be keenly sensitive. He wanted a woman to advise him as to how he should act; and he knew not one to whom he could turn for assistance. He had pleaded for them with his mother, but she had pained him by her cold indifference. Her manner of speaking of Madge, and the apparent dislike she had taken to her, wounded him exceedingly, and he resolved to let the subject drop. He did not wish to see the girls insulted by

having charity dispensed to them through a maid; and that, he saw, was all Lady Ashfield would do for them at present. So, in her presence, their names never passed his lips; and she was completely deceived by his seeming forgetfulness.

One day, as Lord Ashfield strolled through the park pondering deeply over the curious dilemma in which he now found himself, he suddenly thought of Sylvia Atherstone. She would surely help him. He had known her as a child, as a growing girl. She was always kind and generous, and would have no difficulty in finding some feasible way in which to assist Dora and her sister.

"Why did I not think of her before?" he cried. "If I can interest her in these poor orphans, their troubles and mine are practically at an end. And if I can only persuade her to visit them, and she sees little Dora, she cannot fail to become their friend. And Sylvia is so good, so kind, she is sure to grant my request. But how can I see her, I wonder? She lives in a whirl of gaiety since her presentation, and is probably never at home. I must ask my mother; she knows all her doings, and is her chaperon everywhere she goes. It is just tea-time, and perhaps by a stroke of good luck, I may find the madre in the house. I'll try anyway."

Lady Ashfield was at home, enjoying a rest and afternoon tea in her own particular sanctum, the pretty boudoir that Madge had admired so much.

"My dear Ashfield, what a delightful surprise!" she

exclaimed joyfully, as her son entered the room and greeted her with a loving kiss. "Why, it is ages since you came to have tea with me."

"Well, mother, you are not often to be found here at this hour," he answered smilingly. "Methinks you more frequently drink tea abroad than at home."

"True," she said, sighing; "I lead a busy life and have many engagements. And since I have had Sylvia to chaperone, I have scarcely a moment's peace."

Ashfield laughed softly, and helped himself to a dainty roll of bread and butter. "Now, mother, confess. You know you delight in living in a whirl."

"Indeed, you are much mistaken, Ashfield. I delight in nothing of the kind. But it is a duty I owe to society."

"Poor mother! What a tyrant society is! But tell me, does Sylvia feel herself a victim also?"

"Sylvia? That girl is never tired. She rushes here, and rushes there, and always looks as fresh as possible. I tell her it is unladylike to be so strong. But she only laughs, and starts off for something new."

"Quite right. I am glad she enjoys herself. I suppose it would be impossible to find her at home, at tea-time for instance? I daresay she is either out or entertaining a crowd of people?"

Lady Ashfield looked at her son in astonishment, then bent over the teapot to hide the pleasure in her eyes.

"Is he coming round to my views at last?" she

asked herself. "Is he now anxious to meet Sylvia and woo her as his wife? It seems like it. For what other reason should he suddenly wish to see her in her home? He has heard her beauty praised, has seen how she is admired, and has doubtless discovered how much more charming she is than any other girl he has ever met."

However, she resolved to keep her thoughts to herself, but at the same time give him every opportunity of cultivating Sylvia's acquaintance.

"Our little friend's moments at home are precious," she said aloud, "and are all devoted to her grandfather. She is the sweetest, most loving child possible. Your best chance of meeting her would be if you would come about with me a little more—come to balls and evening parties."

"My dear mother, balls are not in my line. I don't dance, and"—

"That is a pity—for this very evening Sir Eustace is giving a ball to celebrate Sylvia's coming out. It will be a brilliant affair. I am to help to receive the guests, as they are both new to everything and everyone. Therefore I go early."

"Then I shall go with you. I don't affect such entertainments much as a rule," he said, laughing. "They rather bore me, I confess; but I should enjoy seeing Sylvia at her first ball. So you may count upon me as your escort to-night."

"That will be charming. I leave this at ten o'clock sharp. So pray do not be late."

"Not for worlds. And to make my punctuality more certain, I will dine with you, mother, if you will allow me."

"My dear boy, you know you are always welcome. I am quite alone to-night."

"So much the better. It is a long time since we dined *tête-à-tête*. Now I must be off. I have some business to transact. Farewell till dinner-time."

And, well pleased at the thought of seeing Sylvia so soon, Lord Ashfield got into a hansom and drove off to his club.

CHAPTER XVI

LORD ASHFIELD MAKES A REQUEST

THE ballroom is ablaze with lights. Every nook and corner is filled with palms and sweet-smelling flowers. The doorways are hung with wreaths of deep yellow roses and maiden-hair fern, and the conservatory resembles a fairy bower, with its dainty lanterns and choice exotics. In a small gallery at the end of the room the musicians are tuning their instruments, and the beautiful parquet shines like a mirror. Everything is ready, and awaits the arrival of the guests.

"Oh, grandpapa, is it not lovely?" cried Sylvia, gliding across the floor, her white tulle dress floating gracefully about her slim figure. "I never saw anything like the flowers. They are exquisite."

"I am glad you are pleased, my pet," said Sir Eustace, bending to kiss the girl's eager face. "And I really think it looks very nice. But Lady Ashfield is late—I hope she will soon come. I feel quite nervous."

Sylvia laughed merrily.

"Nervous! Oh, grandpapa, what a confession!"

"A terrible one, I admit. But I am old, Sylvia, and it is years and years, since I played the part of host at a ball."

"Poor darling! It was a shame to torment you into giving one;" and she laid her hand caressingly upon his arm. "You should have been firm, and refused. I would not have cared in the least."

"But Lady Ashfield would, dear. She insisted I should give it."

"You must not allow yourself to be ruled so much by Lady Ashfield, grandpapa." And the white forehead was puckered into a frown. "You must not indeed."

"No, dearest, not after to-night. But you will enjoy this ball, my pet?"

The frown vanished; the beautiful eyes sparkled with pleasure.

"Oh yes. I enjoy everything so much, grandpapa."

"That is right. That is what I want you to do."

"But, do you know, I sometimes feel frightened—as if—well, as if I should not always be so happy."

"My dear child, those are foolish thoughts. Put them away. My little grand-daughter shall never have anything to make her unhappy, I hope—I pray."

"Dear grandpapa, not if you can help it, I am sure. You have always spoiled me, and saved me from even the smallest trouble."

"Of course I have. And now, let me see my pet

dance and enjoy herself. That will prevent me from feeling tired or worried. You are looking well to-night, my pretty Sylvia, and your triumph will make me happy."

The girl made him a sweeping curtsey, and looked up with a merry glance.

> "Your grand-daughter Sylvia
> Is too young;
> She cannot bear
> Your flattering tongue."

Then, suddenly recovering herself, she cried—

"But a truce to our gaiety, sweet grandpapa. Here comes our kind assistant, Lady Ashfield. Now, I trust your mind is at rest."

"Quite," said Sir Eustace, laughing; "I breathe more freely."

"Pray do not confess your weakness, or we are undone," cried Sylvia melodramatically; "put on a bold front, my revered grandfather, and let no one say we are afraid to face our guests. Look as though receptions such as this were quite an everyday occurrence. *En avant!* Courage!"

And, taking the old man's arm, Sylvia drew him forward to meet Lady Ashfield and her son.

"My dear Ashfield, this is indeed a pleasant surprise," exclaimed Sir Eustace, turning to his young guest and shaking him warmly by the hand. "I did not expect you would honour us with your company to-night. I fancied political meetings were more to

your taste than balls. But believe me, Sylvia and I are delighted to see you. Eh, Sylvia?"

"Yes, grandpapa, certainly we are. It was very kind of Lord Ashfield to come."

"He came expressly to see you, Sylvia," whispered Lady Ashfield; "so I hope you will be nice to him."

The girl raised her eyes, full of inquiry, to the lady's face.

"Why do you say that? I always liked Lord Ashfield," she said frankly; "so of course I shall be nice to him."

"To be sure. I forgot. Sir Eustace, your granddaughter is terribly matter-of-fact."

"She always says exactly what she means, and she is glad to see your son. They are old friends, remember."

"Yes; but come and take me round the rooms, that I may admire them before the crowd comes."

"With pleasure." And, offering his arm, he led her away.

"It is extremely kind of you and Sir Eustace to welcome me so warmly, Miss Atherstone," said Ashfield; "and I hope you will reward what you call my goodness, by granting me a dance."

"Certainly," she answered, smiling; "which will you have? I do not dance until number ten, as I must receive my friends."

"May I have number ten?"

"Yes. But do you remember our first dance together, Lord Ashfield?"

"Of course I do. You were a wonderful little fairy in those days, and very impertinent to your elders. I shall never forget how you ridiculed my attempt at dancing."

"But I was only a child," she said, laughing and blushing, "and a very naughty one, I am afraid. That is eight years ago, remember. I would not do so now."

"I am not so sure. There is a very mocking expression in your eyes, Miss Sylvia. But I shall not put temptation in your way. I shall not ask you to dance, but merely to sit out the waltz with me. I have a favour to ask you."

"I hope it will not be anything very difficult, for I should like to grant it. But see, our guests are arriving. You will find me on the landing outside the ballroom door, when it is time for our dance."

And, bowing graciously, she took her place between Sir Eustace and Lady Ashfield.

The ballroom now began to fill rapidly, and upon every side Lord Ashfield was greeted with exclamations of surprise. His appearance at an entertainment of this kind was so unusual, that his friends could not conceal their astonishment on beholding him. But he only smiled, and gave them anything but satisfactory reasons for his coming forth from his seclusion to mix with the giddy crowd. He did not dance, but went about amongst the people he knew, laughing and talking, apparently unconcerned; whilst in reality he was feverishly impatient. He longed

for the time for his dance with Sylvia to come round, as he felt keenly anxious to know what she would advise about the Neils.

At last the desired moment arrived, and Lord Ashfield pressed forward through the crowd, to claim his beautiful young hostess for the waltz.

His mother looked up as he approached, and seeing the evident pleasure with which he reminded the girl of their engagement, she felt much delighted.

"How anxious he is to talk to her!" she thought, as they vanished into the conservatory together. "He seems thoroughly in earnest to-night."

And so he was. But had Lady Ashfield known why, had she guessed even faintly the cause of his earnestness, the subject of his conversation, she would have done all that lay in her power to separate these two, and prevent the possibility of Sylvia meeting the Neils, at least until she had seen Madge and obtained her promise of secrecy. But she was blissfully unconscious of her son's intentions, and only too well pleased to see him acting, as she thought, on the good advice she had given him.

Meanwhile Sylvia and Ashfield made their way through the ballroom, and seated themselves on two comfortable chairs amongst the flowers.

"It is really a pleasure to sit down again," said Sylvia gaily; "standing shaking hands with several hundred people is a very fatiguing occupation."

"Very. But you seem to have done charmingly," he replied; "your guests are loud in your praises,

and your rooms are beautiful. They do you great credit. The decorations are perfect."

"Yes, I think they are. But I had nothing to do with them. Mr. Algernon Armstrong did everything for us."

"Indeed? That was kind. Is he a very old friend?"

Sylvia laughed merrily.

"Well, you are behind the age, Lord Ashfield. But did you really never hear of Mr. Algernon Armstrong? He does all the smart balls in London."

"Then I must confess to being wofully behind the age. I never heard of him till this moment. I thought ladies always looked after the decorations, and chose their own flowers."

"Some may. But very few, I fancy. Certainly not ignorant girls like me."

"Then is this man a tradesman?"

Syivia looked very much shocked.

"Oh no, he is a gentleman. He was in the—something Hussars, but did not like the life; so he sold out, and took to this kind of thing. For a small fee—ten guineas or so—he does everything, settles everything, and arranges the rooms."

"A noble profession truly. But I think I should have preferred the hussars."

"I daresay. But I am glad he did not. He has saved grandpapa and me much trouble and anxiety."

"Then he is deserving of both respect and gratitude."

"Indeed he is. And grandpapa and I have had such a glorious day, all through him."

"How is that?"

"Well, you see, we had nothing to do at home. The house was in a state of confusion, so we went out early, and pretended we were abroad."

"But how did you manage to do that?" he asked, feeling rather mystified.

"In this way. We had coffee and rolls in our rooms, went off then to the National Gallery, and saw a great many pictures by our old friends, Raphael, Andrea del Sarto, Francia, and Murillo. Then we visited Westminster Abbey, lunched at Blanchard's, and went to Olympia. We had afternoon tea at the New Gallery, and dined at the Grand Hotel. And then we came home, just in time to dress for the ball."

"Such a day! My dear Miss Atherstone, how tired you must be!"

"Not in the least. And do you know, I could hardly believe I was in London. It was just the kind of way grandpapa and I used to live in Paris and other foreign places. I felt the whole day as if I were abroad."

"You have a lively imagination," he said, smiling, "and are easily amused."

"Yes. Lady Ashfield thinks me quite plebeian in my tastes. But," she cried, blushing deeply, "how egotistical you must think me. The dance is half over, and I have not asked you what you want me to do for you. Pray tell me now, Lord Ashfield."

"Thank you. It is very kind of you to remember my words, Miss Atherstone. And I trust you may not be annoyed with me for troubling you in this matter."

"Annoyed? I am greatly flattered that you should think of asking me to do anything for you. I am indeed."

"Your words encourage me. And now tell me, did you ever hear that there were two girls on board the *Cimbria* with you—one about twelve, the other an infant?"

Sylvia looked at him in astonishment.

"Of course I did. The Neils—Madge and Dora. They were both drowned, poor children."

"Pardon me. They were not. They were washed ashore at a small village on the Cornish coast, where they have lived until now."

Sylvia's eyes shone with pleasure, and she clasped her hands together in delight.

"Oh," she cried, "how happy this will make papa! He used to write so much about those children, and mourn their sad fate for a long, long time. Where are they, Lord Ashfield? I should so like to see them. Poor little things!"

Ashfield gazed admiringly at the beautiful, eager face.

"They are not little now," he said, smiling. "Madge is a young woman of seven or eight-and-twenty, and Dorothy is about your own age, although I fancy she looks less; when I saw her last, she was small and ethereal-looking."

"Where do they live?"

"Here in London, not far from Belgrave Street."

"I am so glad. Whom do they live with?"

"No one. They live alone in a poor lodging, the rent of which they find very difficult to pay."

"Are they so very poor, then?"

"Very. Madge teaches in a school, and would give music lessons if she could; and Dorothy"—his voice faltered—"sweet little Dora, who should have been surrounded with every luxury, tended with the greatest care, was brought up in a wretched orphanage, and was obliged to work for her daily bread in a dressmaker's establishment, till her health broke down. She now lies on a sofa in their dreary lodging, fretting and pining because she cannot earn money and help her sister."

"This shall not go on," cried Sylvia decidedly; "something shall be done for them at once. Grandpapa"—

"Pray do not say anything about them yet to Sir Eustace," he said earnestly. "Go and see the girls; talk to them, and get to know them, and then we shall see what can be done. They are very sensitive, and may be difficult to help in any substantial manner. My mother has taken some dislike to Madge, and should Sir Eustace mention them, she might say something to prejudice him against them."

"Your mother! Does Lady Ashfield know these girls too? It is strange she never told me about them."

"She was so indignant with Madge, why I cannot think, that she would do nothing for them. Her conduct in this matter has been a great trouble to me. We are bound in honour, if in nothing else, to help them, for Dorothy, by her presence of mind, saved our lives."

"What a brave girl! But when did she do that?"

"Two years ago."

And then he told her the story of the runaway horses, and Dorothy's struggle with the labourers.

"She must be a darling," cried Sylvia, "and wonderfully strong of will. I long to see her and help to make her happy."

"God bless you! I thought you would take an interest in them."

"Of course. I will go to see them to-morrow. But I really think I must tell grandpapa. I never have any secrets from him, and you need not be uneasy. Papa wrote so warmly about these girls and their father, that, no matter what Lady Ashfield said, he would surely help them."

"Very well. Perhaps you are right. And there is one thing you might do, that would be kind. Take Anne Dane to see them. Madge is very anxious to meet her once more."

"I cannot do that, as Anne is in the country. She is not strong, and does not like London. But I am sure she will be glad to hear about the Neils. She has often wept bitterly in thinking of their sad fate. She was very fond of the little one."

"Poor child! Would that we had found them out sooner. They lived within ten miles of Ashfield Park. But then my mother and I were always away. If we had only heard about them some years ago, their lives might have been very different."

"Yes," said Sylvia in a voice full of emotion; "and what a contrast my life has been! And yet"—

She stopped abruptly; a shudder passed over her slender frame.

"I, too," she whispered, "might have been cast away on some lonely shore, and never reached dear grandpapa."

"Thank God you were saved from that fate," he said earnestly. "But pray do not let this story depress you, Miss Atherstone. See, people are beginning to wonder at our solemn looks. There is nothing to grieve over now. Between us we shall surely be able to make these girls happy."

"I sincerely hope so. And thank you a thousand times, for giving me the pleasure of being the first to come to their assistance."

"The thanks should all come from me," he answered, smiling, "for you have taken a load from my shoulders. And now, I must say good-night. Here comes your partner for the next waltz. I shall make my adieux to Sir Eustace and slip away. Good-night."

"Good-night, Lord Ashfield. I shall long for to-morrow to come, and I think you may trust me to do what is right."

And as Sylvia put her hand in his, she raised her lovely eyes, full of deep, tender feeling, to his.

"I do not doubt it," he said, with emotion. "You are as good as you are beautiful. May God bless you!"

And before the girl could speak again, he had vanished into the crowd.

CHAPTER XVII

MADGE LOSES HER SITUATION

As Madame Garniture drove away, Dora toiled wearily up the high staircase to her room. She walked like one in a dream, and was scarcely conscious where she went. Habit alone guided her; and so she unlocked her door, took off her hat, and flung herself down once more upon the old hair-covered sofa.

Her head was in a whirl, her mind bewildered and excited, her cheeks burned feverishly, and her eyes shone with a brilliant light.

It was her dinner-hour, and there on the table was the chop that Madge had left ready for her, before going out in the morning. She had only to put it on the fire, in the usual way, and eat it with the roll of fresh bread that her sister had taken care to provide for her. But she forgot the time of day, forgot that she should be hungry, and lay upon the sofa, staring at the ceiling and murmuring sadly from time to time.

"Sylvia at last, so good, so beautiful—and yet not Sylvia, but Dora. Mistress of all that should be mine. Happy and proud of her position. Poor girl,

poor unsuspecting girl! Oh, what is to be done? What is to be done?"

Thus she remained all through the long afternoon, and no one came near to disturb her reverie. But at last, as the clock struck eight, Madge's foot was heard upon the stair, and Madge's voice cried out in surprise as she entered the room—

"Dora! What have you been doing? Why is there no light—no fire?"

Dorothy sprang to her feet.

"Oh, Madge," she gasped, "I am so sorry. But"—

Then, throwing her arms round her sister's neck, she burst into a fit of passionate weeping.

"My darling," said Madge gently, and caressing the golden head as it lay upon her breast, "has that cruel landlord been here again? Has he"—

"No, no—it is something more than that. Madge, Madge, I have found Sylvia Atherstone."

Madge staggered slightly, her lips quivered; every vestige of colour left her cheeks. Her heart gave a wild bound—a leap of joy, and, raising her eyes to heaven, she murmured, "My God, I thank Thee. And now, my pet," she said, drawing Dora down upon the sofa, "be calm, and tell me all. How and when did you see this girl?"

"This morning, in her own home, a splendid house in the Cromwell Road—a mansion, Madame Garniture called it. But oh, Madge, she is so good, so beautiful!"

"I daresay; she was a sweet, a lovely child."

"She was so kind to me, Madge, so thoughtful,

although I was there as a poor work-girl," sobbed Dora; "and when I heard who she was, I felt such a traitor, stealing into her home, learning where she lived, that I might betray her and rob her of everything!"

"Do not call it robbery, Dora. It will only be restitution."

"Restitution? If—oh, if she would but give us a little of her wealth, we might allow her to remain as she is—not ask for restitution, Madge."

"My dear, it must be all or nothing. If I go to Sir Eustace—for that, though I never knew it until Lady Ashfield called him so, is the name of your grandfather—if I go to him, I must say, 'This girl is not your grandchild, but an impostor, and my sister. Your son's daughter has been brought up as a pauper. Restore her to her rights, send away this Sylvia, who, beautiful and graceful as she is, is only a usurper, and take to your heart this little, fragile, golden-haired waif, who has suffered want and privation all these weary years.'"

"Yes, yes. So I have," said Dora plaintively; "and you too, my darling, you too. When I am rich, you shall share my wealth. Nothing shall separate us, Madge. Promise me that."

"Not if I can help it, love."

"And Sylvia shall live with us too. She will not mind me taking her place, if I let her stay with me, and be my sister. She has been first all these years She will not mind giving up to me so very much after

all, perhaps. But oh, I do wish she had not been so kind and sweet. Were she proud, and cold, and hard, I should not care. But knowing that she"—

"Dora, do not wish her different from what she is. If she is good, really good, so much the better. She will then bear this trial—for it will, it must be a trial—in the proper spirit. And now, let us forget her for the present. We know her address, and can go to her when we choose to declare ourselves. But I must think the matter well out, and determine how it is to be done. I do not wish to be scorned as a madwoman or a liar by Sir Eustace, as I was by Lady Ashfield. I must lay my plans, and take Anne Dane by surprise. If I can force her to tell the truth, our troubles will soon be at an end."

"Yes, dear. You are right. And now, my poor Madge, you must want your supper."

"Yes. But you must want it more. For I find that you have never touched your chop, Dora, and that was very wrong. So now I must be quick, and get something ready."

Then down upon her knees went Madge, to light the fire whereon to cook their evening meal.

Several days passed over, and the girls were still in doubt as to the best manner in which to approach Sir Eustace Atherstone.

Anne Dane, Madge found she could not see, for, on inquiring at Cromwell Mansions, she was told that she did not live there, but in the country. This surprised the girl, and increased her difficulties a hundredfold.

She was much perplexed, and knew not what to do. To force her way into the old man's presence would, she felt, be folly, and only expose her to insult and humiliation. Lady Ashfield's reception of her story had taught her a lesson, and she resolved to wait as patiently as she could, till some fitting opportunity should present itself. But as she went on with her work at the school, she prayed constantly that something might turn up, for her heart was full of anguish. It was hard to make ends meet; and Dora grew weaker and more fragile every day. This, she knew, was for want of proper air and nourishment. And her mind became embittered, her soul full of hatred against these wealthy people, who were so cruelly defrauding her darling of her rights.

One night, as she was returning from a weary day's teaching, she passed by Sir Eustace Atherstone's splendid mansion. A carriage was waiting, and presently the door opened; the sound of rippling laughter was heard, and Sylvia, arrayed in pure white, her shoulders covered with a mantle of plush and swansdown, came forth on her grandfather's arm.

The light of the lamps fell upon her beautiful face and touched the rich auburn of her hair.

Madge trembled, and leaned heavily against the railings.

"She is lovely," she cried; "but oh, what a cruel wrong has been inflicted on my poor Dora! And by my sister! All this should be hers, and shall be hers, if there is justice on earth or in heaven."

The carriage door was shut, the footman mounted the box, and, all unconscious of the misery she had caused, Sylvia drove away to her dinner-party.

After this Madge grew morose and taciturn. The girls at Penelope Lodge complained of her irritable temper, and one after the other refused to receive their lessons from her. Her employer was much annoyed, and, sending for Madge, reprimanded her severely, threatening to dismiss her immediately, did she hear any further complaints. Terrified at what might be her fate and Dora's should she thus lose her salary, which, poor as it was, was their only means of subsistence, the girl promised to watch more carefully over her temper, and left the mistress's presence firmly resolved to do so.

But, alas! she knew not how severely she was to be tried.

Schoolgirls are frequently wild and thoughtless. They trouble themselves little about the sufferings of their teachers—are selfish and unforgiving. This the pupils of Penelope Lodge soon proved by their unfeeling conduct towards the poor hardworked governess.

Madge had angered them by her irritability and sharp words, and, perfectly callous as to the consequences to her, they determined to get rid of her if they could.

So they set to work in a systematic manner, annoying and insulting her on every possible occasion. It is needless to enter into particulars, or recount the spiteful things that were done, the impertinent speeches

that were made, the acts of disobedience that were committed. Poor Madge suffered keenly. But she struggled bravely with herself, smiled when her heart was ready to break, and spoke gently to her tormentors when wounded to the quick by their impertinence.

Had the girl been happy, had her mind been free from care, she would probably have triumphed over these cruel children, and made them see the error of their ways. But her nerves were unstrung. She was full of bitterness and sorrow; and at last, stung beyond endurance, she flashed out angrily upon her pupils, and upbraided them for their insolence. In an instant the class was in rebellion, and further work was impossible. Mrs. Prim was sent for, and called upon to decide between the girls and the governess. It was a difficult task. There were, doubtless, faults on both sides. But Madge's were the most apparent. She had been already warned, and had failed to profit by the warning, and so must go.

"I am sorry you could not manage to keep the peace, Miss Neil," said the schoolmistress stiffly. "Sorry and surprised. But seeing that you are not capable of doing so, I must ask you to leave my service this day month."

Madge bowed her head in silence. Her heart was too full for words. She felt ten pairs of eyes fixed upon her in triumph, and she trembled lest by look or speech she should show the anguish she endured.

"And now, young ladies," continued Mrs. Prim severely, "I beg that you will pay attention to your

lesson. Miss Neil, you may go to the junior class. I will remain here."

Madge bowed once more, and, with throbbing brow and beating heart, passed proudly across the room and out upon the stairs. Here a sob escaped her, and a shower of tears fell on her burning cheeks. But she had no time to indulge in grief. The class was waiting. She must do her duty. So, drying her eyes, and murmuring a fervent prayer for help, she ran on downstairs.

"A note for you, Miss Neil," said the porter, as she passed through the hall.

And seeing that the writing was Dora's, Madge tore open the envelope in alarm.

"What can be wrong? Why does she write? God keep my darling," she cried, as with trembling fingers she unfolded the letter.

But she was quickly reassured. Dora's note was a message of peace. It ran thus—

"Come home soon, dearest Madge. I have such good news to tell you.—DORA."

Madge kissed the signature and smiled.

"I cannot go till my usual hour. I dare not ask such a favour to-night. But your words, sweet sister, have cleared away some of the clouds that enveloped me. The thought of your good tidings will help me to bear cheerfully whatever torture I may have to suffer before I go home."

And, feeling considerably brighter, she entered the junior classroom, and quietly seated herself in Mrs. Prim's place behind the desk.

CHAPTER XVIII

DORA'S VISITOR

When the guests had all departed, and Lady Ashfield had been safely conveyed to her carriage, Sylvia drew Sir Eustace away from the deserted ballroom into her own little boudoir.

"Now, grandpapa," she said gaily, "we must have a pleasant half-hour before going to bed. You may smoke one of your very best cigars, and I will talk to you."

"But you must be tired, little one," he replied, patting her cheek. "If you don't go to bed, there will be no roses to-morrow."

"Do not be afraid, grandpapa. They will bloom as brightly as ever. But I could not sleep yet. I have something important to tell you."

He looked at her quickly, and a shadow passed over his face.

"Mystery, my darling? Has Lord Ashfield proposed? Does he"—

"God forbid!" cried Sylvia fervently. "No, dearest, he has not. And I sincerely hope he never may."

"Why?"

"Grandpapa, need you ask? You know, oh, you know well I could never accept him."

Sir Eustace smiled brightly, and drew her down upon the sofa beside him.

"My darling is hard to please. Ashfield is most desirable in every way. But you shall not be coerced. Do exactly as you like."

"I will," replied the girl dreamily, as she picked the withered leaves from her bouquet. "Look at these flowers, grandpapa; is it not sad to see them droop their heads?"

"Very sad, dearest. But such is life; all that's bright must fade—a hackneyed, but true saying," he remarked, smiling. "But," looking closely at the bouquet, "that is not the one I ordered for you, Sylvia."

The girl blushed, and nestled closer to his side.

"No, dear; but I thought you would not mind. It—it matched my dress better than yours."

"Did Lord Ashfield send it?"

"No. I would not have taken his instead of yours, although I must say it was very pretty."

"Then who sent you this one, that you say matched your dress better than mine?"

Sylvia lowered her eyes, and her lips trembled slightly.

"I don't know, grandpapa—but I think—I feel sure it came from Paul."

"From Paul?" Sir Eustace started. "My dear, that is impossible. He is abroad—in America."

"Yes, so I believe. But in some way—by his orders—this bouquet was made and sent to me."

"Sylvia!"

"I am sure of this, grandpapa. And—and as I never concealed or kept anything from you in my life, I tell you what I think now."

"My darling!" He put his arm round her, and pressed a kiss upon her brow. "Was this your important communication?"

Sylvia laughed, and laid her bouquet, fan, and gloves upon the couch beside her.

"No, grandpapa. What I wanted to tell you was this: those children, the Neils, who came from Melbourne with me in the *Cimbria*, were not drowned."

"My dear child, how did you hear this?"

"Lord Ashfield told me to-night."

"Ashfield! How does he know?"

"It is a curious story, but very interesting."

And then she related the various incidents, as she had heard them from Lord Ashfield.

Sir Eustace listened attentively; but when she had finished, he made no remark, and sat puffing his cigar, apparently absorbed in thought.

"I cannot understand it, Sylvia," he cried at last, and there were tears in his eyes as he spoke. "Anne Dane saw them go down, and with almost superhuman strength, at the risk of being pitched into the ocean, she saved you as you were sinking with them."

"Anne was mistaken—deceived in her terror. They did not sink, and are now in London."

"The number of times she described that night to me, and the certainty she felt that they were drowned, prevented me from advertising—from searching for them, poor little waifs. But now that we have found them, we must make up for lost time, my darling, and do what we can to help them."

"I knew you would say that," cried Sylvia joyfully. "I told Lord Ashfield so. He wanted me to keep their existence a secret from you. He fears that if Lady Ashfield heard you were going to help them, she would set you against poor Madge."

"But why? Is there anything wrong with Madge?"

"Indeed there is not," cried Sylvia, forgetting that she knew very little about the girl. "She is wonderfully good and clever."

"Well, dear, I shall not mind anything Lady Ashfield may say, and will help these children to the best of my power."

"Then I may go to see them to-morrow?"

"Certainly; and when you know them a little, we shall see what we can do for them. They must have had a hard struggle to live."

"Yes, very. And just think, grandpapa, how different has been my life!" said Sylvia, clinging to him; "and how terrible it might have been if Anne had not saved me, and if I, too, had been cast away with these children—or all alone perhaps."

"My darling, I thank God from the bottom of my heart that such a trial as that was spared us. We

owe a deep debt of gratitude to Anne. What should I have done without you, my precious Sylvia?"

"You would have been lonely, I think," she whispered caressingly. "Although I am a care, and sometimes a worry."

"Never!" he cried indignantly. "Never!"

"What? Not even when you are forced into giving balls for my sake?"

"Not even then, you saucy puss. And now, to bed, or I shall have you looking as limp as your poor bouquet to-morrow."

"There is no fear of that. But now that I have told you my story, I think I shall retire. I *do* feel tired, I confess."

"I thought so, my pet. So now good-night. Do not come down for breakfast, but take a long sleep to make up for all you have lost. Good-night." And, throwing aside his cigar, he folded her in his arms and kissed her tenderly.

The next morning Sylvia did not, however, follow her grandfather's advice, but rang early for her maid; and, much to that young person's astonishment, informed her that she wanted breakfast, and was going out at eleven.

"Does mademoiselle require the carriage?" asked Désirée.

"No. I am going into a poor neighbourhood and shall walk. I want you to come with me."

"*C'est incroyable!*" cried the maid, as she went to obey her mistress's orders. "After a ball, and that

ball at home! But Mademoiselle Atherstone has the strength of—I know not what."

However, Désirée could only submit, and at eleven o'clock she and Sylvia walked briskly along the Cromwell Road.

On leaving home, Sylvia felt full of joy at the thought of her expedition, and the good she would surely be able to do these poor orphans. But as she went down Walton Street, and drew near the house where the Neils lived, she became nervous and uncomfortable. It seemed an impertinence to walk in to these girls and offer to assist them. They might be offended, and resent the intrusion. It would be better, perhaps, to write first to let them know she was coming. But no, that would cause a delay. She had promised Lord Ashfield to see them at once. She would keep her promise.

So on she went, her colour a little higher than usual, her heart beating tumultuously.

She reached the house. Miss Dora was in. Miss Madge was at school.

"You can wait here, Désirée, or return for me in an hour," she said in a low voice. The Neils' rooms were on the fourth floor. A long way up, it seemed to the visitor.

On the last landing the girl paused. There were two doors. At which should she knock? Suddenly the sound of a sweet voice, singing an old Irish air, fell on her ear; and in an instant she knew it must be Dora who sang.

She waited till the song was finished, then knocked gently, and was quickly bidden to enter. She opened the door, and stepped across the threshold; then stopped abruptly, gazing with admiration at the picture before her.

On the sofa lay Dora. Round about her, like a cloak, fell her long golden hair; and her fingers were busy with some yards of pale blue silk, that she was hemming industriously. She did not look up for a moment. And as Sylvia stood watching her, Browning's description in "Gold Hair" flashed through her mind, and seemed as though written for the occasion—

> "Hair such a wonder of flax and floss,
> Freshness and fragrance—floods of it too!"

"Will you kindly shut the door when you go out, Mrs. Sims?" said Dora, without lifting her eyes. "I don't want to get up just now, and there is such a draught when it is open."

Sylvia shut the door, and approached the sofa.

"I hope you will not think me very impertinent," she began, "but"— Dora looked up. She grew suddenly pale as death. A little cry escaped her lips, and, dropping her work, she held out both hands in eager welcome.

"Sylvia!" Then, flushing crimson, "I beg your pardon, Miss Atherstone. I am surprised, yet very glad to see you."

"Sylvia it must be, dear; for we are—at least we ought to be—like sisters, you and I," replied the visitor,

sinking down on her knees beside the couch and pressing her lips to Dora's.

"Sisters?"

"Yes, dear. For, although you may not know it, we were friends when we were little, and were almost lost together in the same wreck."

"Yes," said Dora, "I know; and you"—

"I was saved by my faithful nurse, and carried to my grandfather, to be loved and petted all my life, whilst you—oh, Dora, how different has been your fate! *You* lost your father, mother, all you loved."

"No, thank God! I did not lose Madge, my sweet, my darling sister."

"No, God was too merciful to rob you of all. But oh, Dora, what a hard, hard struggle you and Madge must have had!"

"Hard indeed. But Madge has suffered most. She has had the hardest fight."

"All that is over, dear. Your future is in our hands. Would that we had found you sooner! Papa was so fond of your father, and so anxious to help his children, that he wrote continually to grandpapa to look for you. He would not believe you were drowned. But Anne Dane declared you were."

"Anne Dane," cried Dora, with flashing eyes, "knew we were not—she knew we were alive."

"No, no, dear, you are mistaken. Poor Anne may have been deceived, but she firmly believed you were dead."

"She"—began Dora, then, breaking off abruptly, she

said, "Do not kneel any longer, dear. Sit beside me, on that little stool."

"Why are you on the sofa, Dora?" asked Sylvia, doing as desired. "You seemed pretty well that day you came to Cromwell Road with Madame Garniture."

"Yes; but my spine is always weak, and that morning I had a shock. I have not been well since."

"A shock?"

"Yes. I—we had looked for you so long, so hopelessly, that when I saw you I nearly fainted."

"But you did not know me when I spoke to you?"

"Oh no; but afterwards, when you had gone to the drawing-room, the maid told me."

"Poor little Dora! I wish I had known. I took such a fancy to you that day, because I thought you like my mother."

Dora started, and fixed her eyes upon her in astonishment.

"Your mother?"

"Yes, dear, my dead mother. I never saw her, you know; but that morning grandpapa had just been describing her to me, from what papa had said about her in his letters. She was small and fair, with golden hair and blue eyes; and when I saw you upon the landing, I was startled, for you seemed exactly what she might have been, or rather what her daughter ought to be. It made me sad to think that I was so unlike her. Poor little mother, she died so young! Was Mrs. Neil fair?"

"I don't know," replied Dora in a low voice; "I was only a baby at the time of her death."

"Of course; but then, Madge might have told you."

"She never did."

"And you never asked? That is strange. Did you never wonder if you were like your mother?"

"Yes, often."

"I thought so. Every girl does, I think; at least, every girl whose mother is dead, and whom she has never known. I have not even a picture of my darling. She was born and died in Australia, and no one here ever saw her. When papa sent me home with Anne Dane, he put a miniature of mother round my neck; but, alas! it was lost on the night of the wreck. Wasn't that a pity?"

"Yes."

Dora's lips quivered, and she closed her eyes lest Sylvia should see anything strange in their expression, as she pressed her mother's portrait tightly against her heart.

"Are you in pain, dear?" asked Sylvia, noticing this sudden movement.

"A little," whispered Dora; "but don't mind me—it will pass off."

"Poor child, I cannot bear to see you suffer. But we shall soon make you strong. You must leave these stuffy rooms at once; grandpapa will find you a pleasant place; you shall see a good doctor, and then"—

Dora started up, and, seizing Sylvia's hand, pressed it to her lips.

"Do not make me love you too much!" she cried; "do not show me what a good, noble girl you are, for when you know, when you hear, you will hate me, and then—oh, I cannot bear it!"

And, overcome with emotion, Dora fell back, sobbing bitterly.

"My dear child, what can you mean?"

"Nothing, nothing! Do not look so frightened. But you must not do, or wish to do, too much for us—Madge would not allow it; she is proud. But help her to work—find her pupils who will pay her well—and she will bless you. More, neither she nor I could accept, unless—but that Madge would never consent to."

Sylvia smiled, and, smoothing back the golden hair gently, kissed the girl's fair brow.

"What a pair of proud sisters!" she said playfully. "Lord Ashfield was right when he said"—

Dora trembled, her pale cheeks grew scarlet.

"Lord Ashfield? Did he tell you?"

"He told me all—where you were, who you were, and how anxious he was to help you."

"He has helped us in many ways."

Sylvia looked at her in surprise.

"Really? I thought he had never been able to do anything. Lady Ashfield"—

"Was cruel—oh, so cruel to poor Madge!"

"I am sorry, very sorry to hear that. For, though fond of managing people and things in her own way, she is not unkind."

"No," said Dora bitterly, "but she was to Madge; so much so, that we resolved never to accept any help from her hands. However, she has never troubled us. From the evening that Madge called upon her, we have never heard from her."

"Lord Ashfield told me how grieved he was at his mother's conduct."

"I thought he would be," cried Dora. "I told Madge how good, how noble he was. But, although he saved us from terrible misery by paying our rent, she cannot bear to hear his name mentioned—and all because of his mother."

"She is wrong then," said Sylvia gravely. "For he is exactly what you say, noble and good."

Dora looked at her closely, then turned away to lay her work upon the table. "Do you like him very much?" she asked.

"Very much. I have known him since I was a child."

Dora sighed, and moved restlessly from side to side.

"I might have known," she murmured to herself—"I might have known. She has everything—why not this as well?"

"And you will tell Madge from me," continued Sylvia, not noticing the look of sorrow on Dora's face, "that she must not judge people rashly. It is wrong to blame Lord Ashfield for his mother's fault."

"Yes, yes, cruelly wrong."

"And I think—I am afraid Madge must be rather foolish sometimes. Lady Ashfield was anxious to

help you, but your sister offended her deeply by something she said or did. Of course I was not there, and so do not know how it happened. But Madge should be more careful."

Dora covered her face with her hands and groaned aloud.

"Poor Madge! Oh, if you only knew! But I dare not, I cannot tell you. And now, I hope you may never know."

"Well, dear, you speak mysteriously. But I shall never ask you to tell me anything that you wish to keep secret. And if it is anything against Madge, I should prefer not to hear it, because"—

"Against Madge!" Dora's small frame quivered, and her blue eyes flashed ominously. "Against Madge! Sylvia Atherstone, are you dreaming? Did any one say there was anything against Madge?"

"No, but"—

"Against Madge! Madge, who is so good and true. Madge, who has laboured and struggled. Madge, who has been father, mother, sister, everything to me. As if there could be anything against her—as if"—

Sylvia laid her hand upon Dora's and pressed it gently.

"My dear," she said soothingly, "do not be angry with me. I meant no harm. I am sure Madge is all you say. I spoke thoughtlessly. But your mysterious hints misled me."

"I must speak mysteriously unless— But tell me, Sylvia," she asked almost fiercely, "are you proud of

your position, your name? Would it pain you to become poor, to fall from being Miss Atherstone, to become a poor girl like me?"

Sylvia looked at her wonderingly. She could not understand the drift of these strange questions, and feared the girl's mind must be as feeble as her body.

"I could not imagine such a change, dear," she said gently. "So do not let us talk about the impossible. The question now is, how grandpapa and I can help you and Madge?"

Dora flushed painfully; she did not speak, and two large tears fell from her eyes and ran unheeded down her cheeks.

"Dora!" cried Sylvia, flinging her arms round her. "My dear, you are unhappy. Tell me—what is it? What is this mystery?"

Dora allowed her head to rest upon Sylvia's breast; and, raising her face to hers, kissed her with lingering tenderness. Then, suddenly, she pushed her roughly away.

"Hush!" she said; "do not mention this again. My weak health has embittered me; and for a moment I felt jealous—horribly jealous—and longed to be in your place. To be—what of course I never can be—the beautiful Miss Atherstone."

"I think, dear," said Sylvia, smiling gaily, "we cannot do quite that for you, and you must be content to be the lovely Miss Neil."

Dora gazed at her with shining eyes.

"You are good and kind and beautiful," she cried;

"fit in every way for your place; far, far better than I could ever be."

"Well, I am glad you approve of me," replied Sylvia, laughing merrily. "It is pleasant to know that I am considered a worthy scion of my family by Miss Dorothy Neil. But now we must talk no more nonsense, my fair critic; we must be grave and solemn, and consider what is the best thing to be done for you at once."

"Ask some of your rich friends to take music lessons from Madge. She plays splendidly, and is a thorough musician."

"That has been done already. Here," opening her card-case, "are the addresses of two ladies, who told me last night they wanted a music-teacher for their children. Let Madge go to these houses to-morrow and mention my name. They are wealthy people, and will pay her well. If she plays as well as you say, she will secure three good pupils at least. In time we shall find her more. And she'll soon grow quite rich."

"And then she can leave that odious school," cried Dora joyfully. "This will indeed be good news for my poor darling. Thank you, Sylvia, a hundred times."

"No thanks, dear—and you must give up hemming those frills."

"No, I could not do that. These frills that you speak so contemptuously of save me from—well, too much thinking, and Madame Garniture's pay is a great help."

"But you shall not require it now, my little Dora."

"Certainly I shall. I am not going to live on charity. If I cannot have what is my own—that is," blushing and stammering, "if I have nothing of my own, I must earn it."

"You are as proud as Madge, then?"

"Almost; so you must leave me my frills, Sylvia, till—well, till something turns up."

"You shall do exactly as you please. Be happy in your own way. And now, good-bye. I'll come again soon. But I must go now. Désirée is waiting for me. I am so glad to have found you out."

And, bending, Sylvia kissed Dora softly on the forehead, and hurried downstairs.

"So glad to have found me out. Poor, unsuspecting girl!" murmured Dora, as the door closed upon her visitor. "But oh, how shall we ever let her know the truth? How shall we drag her from her high position, make her his inferior in birth, unworthy to be his wife? I could not do it—I could not do it," and the sweet face was full of pain at the thought. "Alas! what a cruel destiny is mine. But now I must try to be happy. I am pleased that she is so kind, so good, and if—but I will write to Madge, and tell her to hurry back. Mrs. Sims will take my note to the school on her way home. I long to tell my darling the good news, that she may soon leave those insolent girls at Penelope Lodge for some more congenial occupation."

And, rising slowly from the sofa, Dora went to the table, and, taking pencil and paper, sat down to write to Madge.

CHAPTER XIX

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING

As Sylvia went down the stairs, her mind full of Dora, and her pretty, yet perplexing ways, a young man, of about six or seven-and-twenty, entered the house, and came slowly towards her. He was not tall, hardly above the average height, and very slight, with dark grey eyes and a broad, noble brow, from which masses of fair curling hair were thrown in artistic carelessness. His coat was a well-worn black velvet, and the hat he carried in his hand a rather shabby soft grey felt.

The girl's glance fell upon him as he approached, and she gave a little cry; then, stopping short, steadied herself against the banister, and examined him more closely.

"Paul!" she whispered. "Oh, Paul, is it possible?"

At the sound of her voice the young man started. The hot blood rushed to his forehead; his eyes seemed to have absorbed the sunshine.

"Sylvia!"

He ran forward joyfully, caught both her hands, and carried them rapidly to his lips. She drew them

gently away, and looked straight into his eyes. He did not flinch or quail beneath her glance. His was as true, as faithful as her own.

"Paul," she asked, with heightened colour, "why are you here? We thought you were in America."

"I am here," he cried; "because America is too far away. Better to starve in the same town, within a few streets of you, than grow rich with an ocean between us."

"What are you doing?"

"Working one day, idling the next."

"And is that your idea of how a man should live if he wishes to make a name?"

"Name?" he cried bitterly. "I shall never make a name."

"I am very sorry to hear that. I hoped—I believed you would. You did not talk so in the old days."

"I was a simpleton then—a fool."

"Then all your dreams—all your ambition has gone? The promises you made"—

"Sylvia, do not blame me," he implored. "I have been unlucky all through. The fates are against me."

"I do not see that."

"You do not see it? oh, how can you say so? Think what my life has been. As a boy, I was taken from my poor home to Sir Eustace Atherstone's splendid mansion. I was surrounded with luxury, spoiled and petted, a mere plaything for the lonely millionaire. Then you came. I was cast aside. But I cared little for that. I adored you—my sister, my treasure. All

my thoughts were of you—everything I did was to please you. And my first reason for wishing to be an artist was, that I might paint *your* portrait. Then followed our years abroad. My boyish love grew to passion. I told my love—and the penniless dependant was sent away, turned adrift with hard words, to sink or swim as chance decreed."

"You are unjust and ungrateful," cried Sylvia warmly. "Grandpapa wished to continue your allowance, but you"—

"Refused to eat the bread of charity. Yes, Sylvia, when I suddenly realised that you and I, though we lived in the same house and ate at the same table, were not considered equals, I saw the injustice that had been done to me."

"Injustice?"

"Yes, I repeat it, injustice. What right had Sir Eustace to take me out of my natural position, teach me luxurious habits, bring me up on terms of equality with you, his granddaughter, and then, when I told him of my love for you, spurn me and tell me I was a beggar?"

He paused, and, turning his eyes full of indignant feeling upon her, seemed waiting for a reply.

But none came. Sylvia did not speak. Her sweet face wore an expression of sorrow, her mouth a look of pain. Her bright colour had faded as Paul became vehement; and as he gazed at her, longing for a word of sympathy, he was suddenly struck by her extreme pallor.

"Sylvia, you are ill—I have annoyed you," he said, trying to take her hand. "Oh, my love, my love, forgive me."

But the girl sprang aside.

"Do not touch me," she cried, "nor call me by that name, till you have earned the right—till"—

"Sylvia!"

"Paul, listen to me. You have spoken unfairly, ungenerously of my grandfather. In the bitterness of your soul, you have taken all that he has done for you, all the kindness he has lavished on you, in a wrong spirit. You have called him unjust. You must unsay those words, and show by your life that they are untrue, or—or never speak to me again."

"But, Sylvia, how can I do this?"

"By your life; by giving up your idle ways, and working honestly, manfully."

"Of what use would it be?"

"Of great use—to show that you are a man, and not a mere creature of whims and fancies; to show that the affection, the money, and opportunities bestowed upon you by Sir Eustace have not been thrown away; to prove to me that I have not loved a worthless"—

"Sylvia, spare me. I know—I feel my own shortcomings. Do not make me hate and despise myself."

"No," she said, and there were tears in her voice as she spoke, "that is not my object. Oh, Paul, if you would only be true to yourself, exert yourself, and not fritter away the talents God has given you, how happy we might be!"

"Sylvia, do you mean this? Could any effort of mine make a difference? Could *I* under any circumstances be received as yours"—

The girl's white face grew crimson, and her eyes fell beneath his gaze.

"Alas!" he cried, "you know it could not be. I, the son of a simple farmer, could never aspire to the rich Miss Atherstone. Good heavens! why are you not poor? Why are you not like that young girl upstairs, Miss Dora Neil? If you were only in her position, and that my work could help to support you, I'd toil night and day."

"Then why not do so, if only to please me—and grandpapa?"

"He does not care."

"There you are mistaken. He cares a great deal. He loves you, Paul, and misses you, I know."

"Then why did he send me away? Why did he forbid me his house?"

"He sent you away because he thought it his duty to do so, because he was told, advised to do so, by Lady Ashfield. He consulted me, and I agreed that he was right. Yes, I felt that you were not working as you should, that you were too fond of a life of ease. I loved you, Paul; but I saw your faults, and I was full of ambition for you. In Rome, I heard men say that you were clever, almost a genius, and that if you only had patience and industry, you might one day become a great artist. But I was told—'Living as he does, he will never do any good.' And so, when

grandpapa said that you were to be left behind there, that you were not to live with us any more, I felt he was right. If Paul, I thought, loves me as he says, separation can do no harm—it will inspire him with an anxiety to work. But I and grandpapa have both been bitterly disappointed. At the first mention of leaving us, you lost your temper, your foolish pride was up in arms at once, and with angry words you flung away from Sir Eustace, declaring that you would never take another penny of his money. Since then you have not written, and it was only by chance that we heard you had gone to America; and now, by another curious accident, I come face to face with you, and so learn that you are in London."

As Sylvia's words fell upon his ear, and she told him thus, in a voice full of sorrow and tender feeling, the story of his separation from her, whom he loved with all his soul, and put before him in a new light his quarrel with the man who had been a kind, indulgent father to him since his earliest boyhood, he felt stricken with shame and remorse. With folded arms he stood before her, and as she spoke, his head dropped upon his breast, and he dared not raise his eyes to hers.

As the girl ceased, she turned away with a sigh. She had spoken plainly, had told him the unvarnished truth, and had, perhaps, offended him beyond forgiveness. Well, she had done what she thought right, and if he should take her lecture badly, she must bear it. She had delivered it for his good; she could

not regret having done so. She waited a moment, expecting him to make some angry retort, or mutter some words of excuse. But he stood in sullen silence, showing neither by look nor movement that he had heard her last words.

Sylvia glanced at him in pained surprise. A mist rose before her eyes, and she felt a strange throbbing at her heart.

"Good-bye, Paul," she said, with a little sob. "I must go. Good-bye."

She walked past him, then turned and gazed at him sadly, longingly. He looked up, and as he met her beautiful eyes fixed upon him in earnest pleading, the last remnant of false pride fell away, and he felt deeply penitent, and full of remorse. In an instant he was by her side again.

"Sylvia," he cried in a voice of anguish, "do not leave me just yet. Listen to me, I implore—I entreat. Your words have opened my eyes, torn down the veil that my pride had hung before them. I had always looked upon myself as the person most wronged. But now I see how shameful, how ungrateful, has been my conduct."

A look of joy flashed across Sylvia's lovely face, and, smiling radiantly, she put her hand in his.

"Bravely spoken, Paul!" she cried. "Your pride blinded you, I know. But, proud as you are, you are generous also, and, having seen and acknowledged your faults, you will, I am sure, atone for them as quickly and as fully as you can."

"Alas! I can never do that."

"But you can, if you will."

"Will! Oh, Sylvia, if I only knew how, that will never be wanting."

"It is quite easy," she said gently. "At least, I think it should not be so very hard. You must go to Sir Eustace, and tell him what you feel, ask him to forgive you, and, believe me, your prayer will not be long unheard."

"And shall I tell him what my life has been?" he asked abruptly. "How I have wasted my time and my talents, painting only when forced to do so by bare necessity?"

"Yes, tell him all. But also tell him that you are about to change your way, that you are going to work at last."

"I can do little. My room is small. I have bad light."

"Then you must take a studio. There are some excellent ones in the Fulham Avenue. I have been there on Show Sunday, with grandpapa."

"That is impossible. A poor beggar like me cannot afford such a luxury. I told Lord Ashfield so only yesterday."

"Lord Ashfield? Does he know you are in town?"

"Yes. He has sat to me for his portrait, like a good fellow, and since then I have received an order to paint the wife of a city-nabob, who is proud to have her portrait done by an artist who has just taken the likeness of an earl."

"I am glad to hear that, for it shows me that you are not quite so idle as you would have me believe. But now you must take that studio."

Paul looked at her gravely, and shook his head.

"I mean what I say," she replied earnestly. "You must take it."

"But the money?" he asked impatiently. "Where is it to come from?"

"From Sir Eustace. Now do not turn away, but listen to me, Paul. Some time ago grandpapa offered you an allowance. You in your anger refused it. But now you see you were wrong, and you acknowledge your folly. Then go and say so. He was your father for years. Confess your fault, and, in all humility, ask him to help you for a few years, till you begin to get on. This, surely, is not a very difficult thing to do?"

"It will be terribly hard, but to please you, Sylvia, I will do it."

"That is right," she cried brightly. "You have made me very happy. I am sure if you will only try, you will succeed splendidly. And you must tell grandpapa that you are determined to do so, that you have a high ambition, a noble purpose to achieve."

"And may I say that you, Sylvia, have held out a hope, that should I one day distinguish myself, you will think kindly of me? And perhaps"—

Sylvia held out her hands, and as he pressed them to his lips, she looked at him earnestly.

"Paul," she whispered, "work and hope. God will take care of our future."

Then she turned from him and ran swiftly downstairs.

"My God!" he cried, as she vanished from his sight; "what a fool I have been, wasting my life in idleness and folly! but it shall be so no longer. She —my Sylvia, my love!—shall live to be proud of me, to rejoice at my success."

And he went into his room and locked the door.

That evening, as Sir Eustace Atherstone sat reading in the library, a footman entered, and asked if he might admit a gentleman who wished particularly to see him.

"What is his name?"

"He refused to give it, Sir Eustace."

"You may show him in."

The servant bowed and retired. A moment later the door opened again, and the stranger walked in.

Sir Eustace laid aside his book, and, turning, looked at his visitor.

"May I ask," he began, then paused, and sprang to his feet.

"Paul—you here?"

"Yes, Sir Eustace, I am here, here to tell you of my sorrow for my past conduct, and to implore you to forgive my wild words, my bitter ingratitude."

"My boy," said Sir Eustace, with much emotion, and grasping him warmly by the hand, "I forgave you long ago. Your behaviour was that of a hot-headed,

foolish youth. I knew you would be sorry when you had time to reflect; you have taken almost a year to do so; but better late than never. I am truly glad to see you. This will be good news for Sylvia."

"She knows all. She it was who brought me to my senses, showed me how wicked, how foolish I had been."

A cloud passed over the old man's face.

"Sylvia saw you, talked to you, and yet did not tell me? That cannot be; only last night she spoke mysteriously of a bouquet that she thought came from you, but she never said she had seen you."

"I did not meet Sylvia till to-day. She was as surprised as you to find I was in London. For although she may have guessed that I sent the bouquet, because of a certain arrangement of the flowers, she could not know that I had come back to England. We met by accident, on the staircase of the house in which I lodge."

"Of course: I might have known my darling would never have concealed your meeting. But I have been away all day, and have not seen her since morning. And now, Paul, what about yourself? What have you been doing? Are you getting on in your profession?"

"I have made no way, Sir Eustace. I have painted for my daily bread. When I had enough for that, I idled, and spent the money I earned."

"Well, well, you must turn over a new leaf. You have sown your wild oats. Now you must begin to work seriously."

"I am determined to do so," answered Paul decidedly. "And now, Sir Eustace, I have a request to make. You once offered me an allowance; I refused it with scorn, because, since I could not have your most precious jewel, I would have nothing. I would now ask you to give me that help, unless you have lost all faith in me, and have ceased to take an interest in me and my career."

"My dear Paul, for years you were dear to me as a son, and, until that unhappy quarrel, I never received a rude word from you. You now return asking for pardon, and I grant it, wholly and entirely. From this hour we are friends again. The three hundred a year I allowed you when in Rome has been duly paid into the Union Bank for you ever since that day when I first mentioned it to you. Send for your bank-book, and you will doubtless find you have a goodly balance to your name."

Paul was speechless from emotion, and his eyes were wet and shining, as he raised them gratefully to his benefactor's face.

"You are good, too good," he stammered at last. "How shall I show my gratitude?"

"By working hard, and making a name for yourself. Let me hear you spoken of as an industrious man, a rising artist, and I will be satisfied."

"It shall be done. And you will come and see me; let me paint your portrait."

"Certainly, with pleasure. But, Paul" — Sir Eustace hesitated, took up a book, and laid it down

again, sighed, and turned away to the mantelpiece.

"Yes, Sir Eustace," said Paul, "you were about to say"—

The old man wheeled round, and looked fiercely at Paul. "My ideas, my wishes as to your intercourse with my grand-daughter are unchanged. You must not come here, or seek to meet her."

Paul coloured to the temples. This was the subject of their former quarrel. At these remarks, or similar ones, he had lost his temper, insulted his benefactor. But he was wiser now. Sylvia's looks and words that morning had filled him with joy, given him hope that nothing could take from him. She obeyed her grandfather, and wished him to do the same. But she would be true to her own heart. So he overcame a rebellious inward rising, and answered quietly, "I shall do exactly as you command."

"That is right," cried Sir Eustace cheerfully. "Your journey to the States has done you good—changed you in many ways."

"It has. But in one thing I can never change, and it is right that you should know it. I love Sylvia now, as dearly as ever. I shall never cease to love her."

"What folly!"

"It may be folly, but, whatever it is, it is part of my life. Would that she were poor, that I might win her, and make a home for her by my own exertions!"

"That is a cowardly wish. Why should you want to lower her? Better far to try to raise yourself to her."

"But of what avail? She is as far above me as the stars," he cried, and there was a pathetic ring in his voice as she spoke. "And you, Sir Eustace, would never help me to reach her. In your eyes my lowly birth would always be an insurmountable barrier."

"It would. I do not approve of people marrying out of their sphere. Therefore, I hope you will forget my grand-daughter."

"And Sylvia? Is she to be sacrified? Is her heart to be broken?"

Sir Eustace started. He grew white to the lips. "Sylvia?" he groaned. "She does not, cannot care"—

"Sir Eustace, pray do not curse me in your wrath," cried Paul, with emotion. "It is not my fault that Sylvia has been true; that all these years, surrounded as she has been with men more worthy, more cultivated than I, she had grown to love me, the friend of her childhood. I came here this evening, resolved to tell you all; there shall be nothing deceitful in my conduct."

"Then you mean to tell me"—

Paul's eyes shone radiantly, he stood proudly erect, and shook back the fair hair from his brow with a gesture of delight.

"That Sylvia loves me? Yes, thank God, I am sure of it."

The old man sank into a chair, and, covering his face with his hands, murmured sadly—

"Oh, my darling, has it come to this? Has it come to this?"

But presently he rose up, and, going close to the young artist, looked at him anxiously.

"Paul," he said in trembling accents, "your words are a revelation to me, and change all my ideas. I thought my Sylvia was a child still. And now, as I remember many things she has said, many expressions of her lovely face, I know you are right. She is a woman. Poor darling! God keep her from sorrow."

"Sir Eustace," cried Paul passionately, "you do not think I could ever bring sorrow to my love? You cannot—you must not say so."

"Paul," cried the old man solemnly, "are you worthy? Has your life been one to make you worthy to lift your eyes to a girl so noble, so pure and holy as my Sylvia?"

"No, to my shame, I own it. It has not."

"Then, how can you expect me to welcome you as her husband? I am speaking to you now, as I would speak to any other man, were he of the noblest in the land. Birth, riches, honours are little value compared to that of an upright, a spotless character. And to no one living shall I give my darling till he has proved beyond doubt that his life is honourable in every way."

"Sir Eustace, you are right," said Paul, with humility. "I bow to your decree. But I ask you honestly to tell me what your decision is. If I work hard, if from this hour I lead a life of industry, if my labours are crowned, not, perhaps, with world-wide fame, but with a fair amount of success, and at the

end of this year I come to you, and you find that Sylvia still loves me, will you then encourage me to hope to win her as my wife?"

The old man took his hand, and looked straight into his face.

"I believe you are in earnest, Paul," he said. "God grant you all possible success. Everything that I can do to help you in your profession shall be done. At the end of the year, perhaps before, you shall have a more definite answer. But leave Sylvia to me. Do not seek to see her. Leave her free, and —well, we shall see."

"Then I may hope," cried Paul, with quivering lips. "Oh, Sir Eustace, I shall now work night and day. No toil shall tire me, no labour seem too hard. A year will appear as a month"—

"Do not let your enthusiasm mislead you, Paul. Many things may happen in a year. Before that time my son, Sylvia's father, returns. I may then have no power over my darling's life. He may have other views, other ideas for his daughter's future."

"True; but you will speak kindly of me, think kindly of me?—promise me that, Sir Eustace."

"I promise."

CHAPTER XX

A SUDDEN DETERMINATION

As soon as Dora had written her note to Madge, and despatched it safely by Mrs. Sims, a good-natured woman who occasionally did a little cleaning up and down the house, she grew restless and excited. She could no longer lie still upon her sofa; and hemming the blue frills became impossible. So she flung them aside, and began to walk impatiently round the room.

"Madge is later than usual to-night," she cried at last, sinking wearily into a chair. "Just because I want her to be early, those people keep her grinding over their exercises. But, thank goodness! she may soon give them all up. Sir Eustace is rich and powerful, and Sylvia will not forget us, I know. So if Madge is not too proud"—

A sharp knock at the door interrupted her reflections, and she started to her feet in surprise.

"I may come in, I suppose?" asked an unknown voice, and a tall lady, in a trailing silk dress, entered the room, and took the girl affectionately by the hand.

"You do not know me, dear," she said, "and really it is so dark that one can hardly distinguish one thing from another. But by your fair hair I know you are Dorothy. How it has grown since I saw you last! Do you often wear it like that?"

"I beg your pardon. May I ask you who you are?" said Dora, surprised at the strange, familiar manner. "I think you must have come into the wrong room. There are many people living in this house."

"So there are. But I fancy I have come straight to the place I wanted. You are Dorothy Neil. I am your friend, Lady Ashfield."

Dora trembled, and grasped the back of a chair.

"Lady Ashfield!"

"Yes, dear child. You see I have not forgotten you, nor my promise to assist you. You helped us bravely when our horses ran away. Now we must find out what we can do for you. But pray light the gas; I want to see what you are like."

Dora struck a match and silently lit the gas above their heads. She was very pale, and her eyes flashed indignantly, as she remembered the cruel manner in which Lady Ashfield had treated her sister. She looked upon this visit as an insolent intrusion, and feared to speak, lest she should betray the anger she felt.

"That is better," said Lady Ashfield, looking the girl curiously up and down. "Now I can see you, and very pretty you have grown, my dear. That hair is worth a fortune."

Dorothy crimsoned and turned away her head.

"I do not wish to make you vain, dear child," continued Lady Ashfield, taking off her heavy plush cloak, and laying it on the sofa. "But you are pretty, as I tell you—and yet," she added, examining her critically, "it is not the prettiness, the beauty, I might say, of the aristocracy. No one would ever pick you out in a room, as they would Sylvia Atherstone, for instance. She bears the stamp of nobility, of family, in every feature and movement; whilst you—well, you are a sweet-looking girl, but you come of a lower class. No living person would ever believe you to be an Atherstone. You do not look it in any way. Sylvia does. It is wonderful how birth shows itself, in the very smallest particulars."

And, leaning back in her chair, Lady Ashfield arranged her necklace, and held her satin-shod feet up to the fire.

As Dora looked at this fashionable lady, in her gorgeous evening dress and sparkling jewels, and heard the cruel words that fell from her lips, a great rage took possession of her. This woman knew the secret of her life, knew that she was really Sylvia Atherstone, and had come there to insult her, and accuse her and Madge of lying. For a moment the room seemed to spin round; her tongue clove to the roof of her mouth; her lips refused to utter a sound.

"What a silent child you are!" cried her visitor. "You seem to have nothing to say for yourself to-night.

I came here, at some inconvenience to myself, on my way to a dinner-party, to see you and Madge, and find out what I could do for you. And, instead of being pleased to receive my visit, and tell me all your troubles, you stand there staring as if you were dumb."

"I am not dumb, nor am I deaf," replied Dora, with dignity. "I have heard your words and understand them perfectly. You are not our friend, and Madge and I must respectfully decline all help from you."

"You are insolent."

"No, only honest. When Madge"—

"Well, dear, what of Madge? Are you rehearsing for a play, Dora?" asked her sister, who came in as she was speaking. "Or—but I beg your pardon. I thought my sister was alone. Good evening, Lady Ashfield."

And, bowing coldly to the visitor, Madge put her arm round Dora, and, having quietly removed the plush cloak to a neighbouring chair, made her lie down upon the sofa.

"You look ill, darling," she whispered. "Close your eyes and rest. I will talk to Lady Ashfield, and get rid of her as soon as possible."

"Oh, Madge, Madge, why is she here now?" cried Dora, clinging to her sister and kissing her tenderly. "I have such good news, dear, if she'd only go."

"Hush, love! we must not be rude. We must treat our visitor with proper civility." And, freeing herself from the girl's embrace, she went over to the fire and stood beside Lady Ashfield.

"A pretty picture. Such sisterly affection is truly touching."

Madge's lips were tightly set, and her dark brows met together in a frown.

"To what are we indebted for the honour of this visit?" she asked stiffly.

"To what? My dear Miss Neil, have you forgotten that I promised to help you—to find you pupils?"

"I remember every word that passed between us, Lady Ashfield," answered Madge quietly, "and I know that I declined to receive assistance from you. You treated me as though I were a madwoman or a liar. You would not believe my story, or help me to restore that poor child to her home and family. And so I told you that I would not take kindness from you in any shape or form. Is that not true?"

"Perfectly. But that was some time ago."

"Time can make no difference. I think the same to-night as I did then."

Lady Ashfield shrugged her shoulders. "You are very foolish," she said, "to refuse help when it is offered. You are poor." She glanced round the room. "Your sister is delicate, and requires change of air and nourishment. This story of yours will never be believed. And whilst you are refusing the assistance of those kind enough to offer it, because they will not accept your account of the wreck, and try to bring misery upon the Atherstones, Dora may die. Then, perhaps, all too late, you may come to see the folly of your ways."

Madge looked at the girl upon the sofa, and her eyes filled with tears.

"Come, now," said Lady Ashfield, observing her emotion, "be sensible. It is impossible to prove this story; then let it drop. Why bring up such a tale when it can do you no good, and only cause unhappiness to others? Promise never to mention it again; and see, I will give you two hundred pounds, and help you to get pupils as far as I can."

And, opening her purse, Lady Ashfield drew out a bundle of bank-notes, and presented them to Madge.

Uttering an exclamation of horror, the girl started back. A flood of crimson rushed over her neck and brow, and her eyes shone with an angry light.

"Put back your money, Lady Ashfield. I am not —my silence never can be bought."

"But you are poor. It will be useful, and no one need ever know."

"I am poor—God only knows how poor!" cried Madge, her whole frame shaken with suppressed passion; "for this day I was dismissed at a month's notice from the school in which I teach."

"Madge!" Dora gave a little cry, and sat up on the sofa.

"I have not a friend in the world," continued Madge, laying her hand soothingly on Dora's head. "But not for all the riches of the universe would I sell my darling's birthright. Did I do so, I should deserve to die."

Lady Ashfield laughed scornfully.

"You would make a splendid actress, Miss Neil. But I must confess your tragic manner does not affect me. You imagine that by talking nonsense like this you may impose upon me, and make me believe your ridiculous story. But I tell you such a thing is impossible. Neither I nor any other human being will ever believe it for an instant. Miss Atherstone is about to marry my son, Lord Ashfield"—

Dora started, and caught Madge by the arm.

"And it is not probable," she continued, "that two poor girls like you could ever prove that Sylvia, grand-daughter of Sir Eustace Atherstone, and wife of a peer of the realm, was other than what she is supposed to be. Give up all thoughts of such a thing, and I will promise to do for you whatsoever you may ask."

Dora rose slowly from her seat upon the sofa, and, walking over to the table, leaned heavily against it. She was very pale; but her sweet face wore a look of strong determination.

"Lady Ashfield," she said, and her voice rang out clearly through the room, "do not be uneasy. Neither Madge nor I shall ever disturb Sylvia Atherstone."

"Dora!"

Madge flung up her hands, and looked wildly at her sister.

"Think of what you are saying, dearest," she cried in great agitation. "Think what such a promise means."

"I have thought, Madge. I know it well," and a little sob choked her utterance. "I have not forgotten what a trouble it will be to you, darling. But my mind is made up. I renounce all claim to the name of Atherstone. Neither Sylvia, nor Lord Ashfield shall ever suffer in any way through me. And—and I hope they may be happy."

Lady Ashfield smiled, and looked triumphantly at Madge.

"I am glad," she said, with a sneer, "that one of you has sense. I suppose I may make this money over to you, my pretty Dora;" and again she held out the notes.

But Dora shrank away, and, flinging her arms round Madge, burst into tears.

"Lady Ashfield," said Madge bitterly, "you have obtained the promise you required. Put away your money and go."

"You may repent your insolence before long, Miss Neil," cried Lady Ashfield angrily. "But, as you say, I have obtained all I require. So I wish you good-night."

And, putting on her cloak, she gathered up her silken skirts and swept proudly from the room.

CHAPTER XXI

MADGE IS PERSUADED TO BE SILENT

Dora's sudden declaration that Sylvia should be left in the full enjoyment of her present happy position filled Madge with dismay. Was this then to be the end of all her dreams, all her hopes for the future? Was this poor child to droop and pine for ever in the midst of dreary poverty, whilst Sylvia spent her life in luxury, surrounded on all sides by the evidences of wealth and affection, that did not lawfully belong to her?

For some moments after Lady Ashfield's departure the two girls were silent. Dora clung to Madge, her face hidden on her breast, her arms round her waist. She trembled violently, and from time to time a sob escaped her.

Madge sighed heavily, and, smoothing back the golden hair, kissed her lovingly.

"You are not angry, dearest?" whispered Dora. "Oh, say you are not angry with me!"

"Not angry, darling; I never could be that with you—but grieved and surprised. Why did you make that promise, Dora? Why did you cut the ground from under my feet?"

"Because—oh, Madge, when you know her, you will feel as I do. Sylvia is so good, so noble, I could not do her harm."

"But, dearest, that is no reason. Because Sylvia is good, you must not suffer. That would not be just."

"Just or not, I am determined not to interfere with her in any way. I shall remain Dorothy Neil all my life."

"But what if I object, Dora?"

"You must not, Madge. And you will not, I am sure, when you know how I long to leave Sylvia in the home she believes to be her own."

"But the poverty, Dora? Think of that. How can I bear to see you want when I remember what your life should be?"

"All that is at an end, Madge; we shall be poor no longer," said Dora, smiling through her tears. "Sylvia was here to-day."

"Sylvia? Why did you not tell me that before?"

"I did not care to do so before Lady Ashfield."

"Quite right, dearest. I forgot. But how did Sylvia find us out? Who told her? Oh, darling, our position grows harder and harder."

"No, Madge, there you are wrong. Sylvia came to us as a ministering angel—her hands full of gifts, her heart full of love."

"But we cannot accept either gifts or love."

"Not if we were planning her ruin. Not if, like Judas, we were accepting her love that it might help us to betray her. But I have resolved—and you, dear

Madge, must agree to do like me—to become her friend to take any kindness she or Sir Eustace may do us with gratitude, and never, by word or look, suggest that *she* was not born to the high position that she fills so nobly."

"Oh, Dora, how can I ever agree to this?"

"Very easily, dearest, when you think the matter out. And, believe me, there will be no injustice done."

"But, Dora, what is to become of us? Mrs. Prim has dismissed me. In four short weeks my time at Penelope Lodge will have expired, and then what are we to do?"

"My dear, I am delighted to hear of Mrs. Prim's dismissal. It will save you the trouble of dismissing her." Dora laughed softly. "See here, these are the addresses of ladies, friends of Sylvia's, who require a music mistress for their children. You are to go there to-morrow, and I fancy you will not long regret the large salary you received at Penelope Lodge. Sylvia said these people would pay you handsomely. So now, dear Madge, you must not fret, but promise to do what I ask."

"My darling, I cannot refuse you. And the hopelessness of proving our story tempts me to accept these offers of friendship. And yet, my mind misgives me. I wish it had not come to this. It would have been better had Sylvia stayed away."

"Madge," whispered Dora, with deepening colour "her coming, her goodness, was not the only thing.

That was not what really decided me. She is going to marry Lord Ashfield. His wife must be of noble, of high position. No act, no words of mine shall cast a doubt upon her, since he loves her."

"My darling, two wrongs do not make a right," said Madge sadly. "However, I agree to do as you wish. To-morrow I shall go and see these ladies."

So, with a heavy heart, and many doubts as to the honesty of her conduct, Madge at last consented to be silent, and gratefully accept any favours that Sir Eustace might choose to bestow on her and Dora.

And these, she soon found, were beyond anything she had ever expected. There was no niggardliness in the treatment they received—quite the contrary; for Sir Eustace was as generous as he was wealthy. And Madge felt bewildered and amazed as she saw how effectually he was about to change their lives. She was obliged to leave Penelope Lodge at once. A pretty flat was taken for them in De Vere Gardens, and furnished in the daintiest manner possible by one of the first upholsterers in London. And an income sufficient to keep them in comfort, even luxury, was placed at their disposal by their kind-hearted benefactor.

"My dear," he said to Madge, when she remonstrated with him for his generosity, "do not deny me the pleasure of helping you, and so making up, if possible, for my long years of neglect. I was wrong to believe you dead—wrong not to have tried every means to discover you. Had your father lived, he

would have filled an honourable post in my employment. It was my son's great wish. He is dead, and I look upon you as a sacred legacy left to me by him. This little one," he continued, laying his hand upon Dora's head, "I shall call my second grand-daughter. She is just my Sylvia's age, and has been beside her in death, I may say. The sight of her makes me remember with gratitude how merciful God was, when He sent my darling safely home to me. You will love me, Dora, and allow me to call you my grandchild?"

Madge coloured deeply, and turned impatiently away. She longed to tell him all—to put an end to this deception. But Dora looked at her warningly. Then, raising her beautiful eyes to Sir Eustace, she put her arms round his neck and kissed him on the cheek.

"Yes," she said quietly, "you have been very good, very kind. I love you dearly, and will always think of you as my grandfather. I have never known my father. Your affection will make up to me for what I have lost."

"Dear little fairy, your life from this day shall be a happy one," he answered, returning her embrace. "Your future is in my hands, and second only to Sylvia in my heart shall be my grand-daughter Dora."

And from this hour Dora was indeed happy. Any idea that she would be living on charity, did she accept money from Sir Eustace, had completely left her. In doing so, she was only taking part of what was really her own, she now argued. And so there

was nothing to embitter or annoy her in her present position. She soon loved Sylvia with an absorbing affection, and took willingly from her hands the many gifts bought for her, with what she knew to be her own money. For this troubled her little. She had all, and more than she required. She was not ambitious, and was well content to see Sylvia reign supreme, as mistress of her grandfather's establishment.

So the days that were formerly spent in dreary loneliness, hemming frills for Madame Garniture, or mourning over her helpless condition, were now passed in driving with Sylvia, visiting museums, picture galleries, and theatres; lunching at one house, and drinking tea at another. For as soon as Dora was seen with Miss Atherstone, and known to be her friend, invitations of all kinds poured in upon her.

Her extreme delicacy prevented her from going out at night, and so she could not go to either dinner or dance. But this she did not regret. In the evenings she had Madge, always eager to welcome her back, and ever ready to listen to her accounts of all she had seen and done during the day. For Madge rarely took part in these rounds of pleasure. She lived in the pretty rooms provided by Sir Eustace, and kept a tender watch over her darling. But nothing would induce her to sit down and eat the bread of idleness. Their benefactor was generous; he was wealthy, she knew, and would never miss the sum of money he allowed them in the year. But Madge was proud. She had no legitimate claim upon him; she would not

be dependent on his bounty. Through her connection with the Atherstones she soon obtained many well-to-do pupils. And so, though not worked so unceasingly as in the old times at Penelope Lodge, her days were well filled up.

And as she went from place to place, her thoughts were ever full of Dora and her future. She felt that things could not always go on as they were at present, and she wondered when the end would come. Where was Anne Dane? What would happen when they met? These questions rose frequently to her lips, and troubled her sadly. Everything was pleasant now, but she was sure this tranquillity could not last; and she believed that the longer they all lived as they were doing, the more bitter would be the change when it came.

Yet, in spite of these misgivings, Madge was very happy. She rejoiced to see Dora living in comfort, prettily dressed, and temptingly served. She had never in all her life been so free from care, and she had money for all she required.

This sudden change in the Neils' position, and the strange manner in which Sir Eustace had taken them to his heart, annoyed Lady Ashfield extremely; and she lived in constant terror lest Dora should forget her resolution and tell someone the story of the wreck —that is, Madge's version of that unlucky night. Not that she believed it, but that she dreaded the misery and vexation that would come upon them all should the suspicion of such a thing get noised abroad.

Unlike Madge, however, she felt sure that every day passed by the Neils in their present position was a decided gain, making disclosure more impossible, and binding them more emphatically to silence.

"Were Sylvia and Ashfield safely married, it would matter but little," she thought. "The settlements would be made, and such nonsense would not trouble them. Sir Eustace would soon hush the matter up, and Sylvia, away with her husband, would never hear of it. Even the gossips would not believe it so easily, once she was Lady Ashfield. But I confess I do not understand these two. At the Atherstones' ball they seemed devoted. Now—well, he goes to the house often, but things do not progress. He still declares they are nothing to each other. He is most provoking."

And as Dora saw more of Sylvia, and came to know her more intimately, she, too, wondered over her manner to Lord Ashfield. With him the girl was frank and gay; pleased to see him when he came, but indifferent as to whether he went or stayed. When he was absent, she rarely mentioned him, and when she did so, it was in a casual way—friendly, but nothing more.

Lord Ashfield's behaviour soon became as incomprehensible as Sylvia's. He visited constantly at the house, drove with the girls in the Park, walked with them in the Row, accompanied them to concerts and teas. Yet, even to Dora's inexperienced eyes, his demeanour was that of a privileged friend, rather than that of an accepted lover. All this bewildered and

saddened the simple girl, yet she tried hard to believe in the love of these two. For they were engaged to be married, she knew. Lady Ashfield had said so. She was his mother. She must surely know.

So Dora held aloof when Lord Ashfield was near. In the house, she buried herself in a book or worked industriously at her embroidery. In the Park and elsewhere, she gazed about her, or talked to Sir Eustace, doing everything she could to give her friends perfect freedom in their intercourse. But all seemed of little avail. Lord Ashfield and Sylvia would not allow her to withdraw from their society. In all they did and said, she must take a part. And, much against her will, Dora felt constrained to do so.

Then followed a time of anguish—a time when Dora was one day miserably unhappy, the next full of joy and nervous excitement. She ought to have been happy, she felt. She wished, yet dreaded to be so, for her mind was torn with doubt, and the fear of causing grief to Sylvia.

When she first met Lord Ashfield at the Atherstones', he showed great pleasure at renewing their acquaintance. He was polite and attentive, treating her with the same consideration as he might have bestowed on the highest lady in the land. To her past life he never alluded. And when Dora thanked him tremulously for his goodness in discharging their debt to their cruel landlord, he implored her earnestly never to mention it again. It grieved him to remember it, for it proved how he and his mother had

neglected their promise, of helping the orphans in their hour of need.

Full of the idea that he was engaged to Sylvia, Dora was distant and reserved. Since that day in Cornwall he had been a hero in her eyes. The sound of his voice, the touch of his hand, thrilled her. The feeling that he was near filled her with happiness. Yet Sylvia was to be his wife, and no word or look of hers should disturb her peace. That these two might be happy, she had renounced her birthright, and left Sylvia in undisputed possession of her home and fortune. For their sakes she would do more. She would conquer her own heart, and kill the great love that was growing up within her.

But in a short time, Lord Ashfield's conduct began to perplex the poor girl, then to fill her with alarm. Instead of talking to Sylvia or Sir Eustace, he devoted himself to her. His long visits were spent by her chair, watching the progress of her embroidery, or conversing with her in low, earnest tones. To Dora the hours went past all too rapidly. She lived in a dream from which she frequently awoke with a shock, as she remembered how cruelly she was deceiving herself, how bitter would be the end that would surely come to these blissfully happy days.

One afternoon, the girl was asked to sing. She consented, and went to the piano. Her song was a simple setting of Mrs. Browning's poem—

> "Love strikes one hour—Love! Those *never* loved
> Who dream that they loved *once*."

Dora sang with pathos. She forgot the company. She put her whole soul into her voice, and the words rang out clearly, pathetically, through the room.

Lord Ashfield stood by the piano. He listened with rapt attention, and when the last sweet note had died away, he bent his head and thanked her in a low whisper for the pleasure she had given him. Dora looked up, her thoughts full of the sad idea of the song. Their eyes met for an instant. A deep blush overspread the girl's delicate cheek, her eyelids quivered slightly, and, rising slowly from the music-stool, she walked blindly to a distant seat.

The next morning Dora complained of not feeling well, and announced her intention of remaining at home that day. Madge was frightened and uneasy.

But Dora declared she only required rest, and implored her sister to leave her to herself for a little. Madge was obliged to go out to give her lessons, and went away with a sinking heart. She had hoped that Dora was outgrowing her delicacy; but now her extreme pallor and weakness alarmed her beyond measure.

About three o'clock Sylvia drove round to De Vere Gardens, and, climbing up to the flat inhabited by the Neils, insisted on carrying Dora off for a drive.

"You need not come home to tea with me, if you do not feel able. But the fresh air will do you good," she said. "So out you must come, my sweet Dora."

Dora could never resist her dear friend Sylvia long; so, after a little judicious coaxing, she at last consented to go.

It was a bright day in February; the air was sharp and frosty, but, as the girls were well wrapped up in furs, they did not feel the cold as they drove rapidly round the Park.

Sylvia was in high spirits. Her beautiful face was full of happiness; her eyes shone with some secret joy. Dora looked at her and wondered. *She* felt so depressed and weary, that it almost angered her to see her companion so bright and joyous.

"What a contrast we are!" she thought despondently. "She was born to be happy—I to be sad. But Madge must take me away. I cannot—will not meet and talk to him again. Sylvia loves him. He—my God, help me! Such a state of things will kill me. It must not go on."

Meanwhile, Sylvia chattered away. If she noticed Dora's sadness, she did not appear to do so, and talked incessantly of her own affairs. She had been to a fancy ball the night before, which had apparently amused her much. She laughed over her partners, criticised their costumes, described the decorations of the ballroom, and praised all the arrangements.

"This ball seems to have excited you greatly, Sylvia," said Dora, somewhat pettishly. "I never saw you so unduly elated before."

"It is not the thought of the ball, or anything that happened there, that makes me feel so gay, dearest," replied Sylvia, with shining eyes; "but a little piece of good news that grandpapa told me this morning."

Dora sighed, and looked out across the Serpentine.

"I am glad you are happy, darling. I'd—I'd do anything to make you so."

Sylvia glanced at her inquiringly.

"Of course, I know you would, dearest. And I would do the same for you. But your happiness will be quite secure without my help, now. There is little doubt of that."

"No, Sylvia. There is no real happiness possible for me. Sir Eustace and you have been good and generous. You have surrounded me with comfort and luxury. I have all I want in that way. But"—

"My dear Dora, you require change of air. You are suffering from depression. Grandpapa and I go into Surrey soon, to our dear, delightful Summerlands. You must come with us. Will you?"

"Yes; I should like to. I do want a change, dear."

"That will be charming. And now we shall go into the streets; the Park looks gloomy. Thomas," to the footman, "drive down Piccadilly and up Regent Street."

"Yes, miss."

The coachman turned his horses, and went out at the Wellington Gate.

After this the girls relapsed into silence. Both seemed lost in thought. The carriage went on as swiftly as possible through the crowded streets, and many heads were turned, many glances of admiration were bestowed upon its two lovely occupants as it drove along.

At Piccadilly Circus they were suddenly stopped,

their horses kept back by the policeman, to allow a number of pedestrians to cross the road.

A young man, well dressed and happy-looking, stood amongst the crowd. As Sylvia's carriage drew up close to him, and he recognised the girls, he uttered an exclamation of pleasure, and raised his hat.

"Sylvia!"

The girl started and looked round. Her colour deepened, and she smiled radiantly.

"Paul!"

Her eyes met his in one long searching glance of inquiry. They were not near enough to speak or shake hands. But that look told her much, and set her heart beating gladly, triumphantly.

The policeman stepped aside, the horses dashed forward, and she was soon far away up Regent Street.

The meeting had been short, no words had passed between the two, yet it filled Sylvia with joy. She had not seen Paul since the day in the Neils' lodging, and the change in his appearance and bearing was remarkable. She had heard he was doing well, working steadily at his profession; she now saw that he had recovered his self-respect, and was happy. To see him thus, to know that he was leading a life of industry, acting as she had wished and advised him to do, was indeed a pleasure. And as he vanished from her sight, she sank back in the carriage, trembling with excitement and delight.

Dora looked at her in surprise. What did this mean? How did Sylvia know Paul Vyner, the artist?

What could he have to do with her? Why was she so agitated on seeing him? All these questions passed in quick succession through her mind. But she did not dare ask her companion why she was so much disturbed. Sylvia seemed unconscious of her presence, so Dora kept her thoughts to herself.

As the carriage turned into De Vere Gardens, Sylvia started from her reverie.

"Must you really go in, Dora?" she asked.

"Yes. I could not go home with you to-day. I must rest. I feel—not very well."

"Poor little Dora! I am sorry. I wish you were happy like me." Sylvia blushed deeply. "You have seen Paul. He—you must have noticed my joy, my delight at seeing him. He is going through his time of probation, Dora, and is doing well—nobly. Hence my happiness. Good-bye."

Dora listened as one in a dream. She kissed Sylvia tenderly, and, turning away swiftly, ran into the house and up the stairs. Her head was in a whirl; her eyes sparkled brightly; her lips were parted in a happy smile. The clouds of misery had suddenly rolled back, and her heart was beating joyfully.

Sylvia loved Paul Vyner. Of that she was now quite certain. Therefore she did not love, nor could she be engaged to marry, Lord Ashfield.

CHAPTER XXII

DORA IS TRIED BEYOND HER STRENGTH

THAT evening, when Madge returned to dinner, she was surprised to find Dora looking bright and well. She was dressed in a dainty white muslin, with pale blue ribbons and clouds of filmy lace. One lovely tea-rose nestled amongst the folds on her breast, and her golden hair was tastefully arranged on the top of her little head.

Madge looked at her admiringly. She had never seen her look so beautiful.

"This is a wonderful resurrection, my pet," she said, kissing her. "Do you feel quite well this evening?"

"Quite."

Dora fingered her rose; her colour deepened and paled again.

"What an exquisite flower! Where did you get it?"

"Lord Ashfield sent it, and some books. He heard I was not well."

"He is very attentive. I suppose for Sylvia's sake he likes to be kind to her friend."

"Madge,"—Dora's sweet face grew crimson,—"it is not for Sylva's sake. It is—they are not engaged."

Madge looked up in surprise.

"Not engaged? My dear, you are mistaken. Lady Ashfield said"—

"Yes. But she was wrong. Sylvia cares nothing for Lord Ashfield, and he"—

Dora paused, and touched her rose with loving fingers.

"Well, dearest? He is grieved, I suppose?"

"No, I think not. I don't fancy he cares. From things I know, have seen, and felt, I think he cares for someone else."

"So your sacrifice, your promise not to interfere with Sylvia, was not necessary and will not affect him whom you wished to save from annoyance."

"No. It will not make any difference to him—at least, as far as Sylvia is concerned. But, Madge"—

Dora sank upon a chair; her colour faded, a look of anguish came into her eyes.

"What is it, darling? Are you ill?"

Madge sprang to her side and flung her arms round her.

"No. But an awful thought has come to me," she gasped. "I have promised Lady Ashfield. I am fond of Sylvia, pledged in a thousand ways to keep that promise. And yet—oh, Madge,"—she hid her face on her sister's shoulder,—"I love Lord Ashfield—and —if—he—should care—ask me to marry him, what shall I do?"

Madge grew deathly pale. She pressed Dora close to her heart, and raised her eyes appealingly to heaven.

"Oh, my God," she murmured, "help this poor child. In Thy great mercy soften this trial that has come upon her. Help her to bear it patiently, with resignation."

"Speak, Madge," whispered Dora; "what shall I do?"

"Alas, my darling! I am afraid to tell you what I think, what I feel to be the only course open to you. By your own promise, made in impulsive generosity to secure the happiness of this girl who had acted kindly towards you, you have placed yourself in a terrible position. Having made this promise, you cannot reveal the secret of your birth, and unless you make it known to Lord Ashfield, you must not marry him. The existence of such a secret, the wrong you would feel you had done him, and, perhaps, others you loved, would make you wretched—ruin your happiness and his."

Dora raised her head and looked at her sister wildly, despairingly; then, with a deep groan, fell back unconscious in her arms.

Full of tender pity, Madge laid her on the sofa, and bathed her face with eau-de-Cologne. At last she opened her eyes and looked around. But she was very weak, and trembled all over; so the pretty dress was removed, the golden hair unbound, and she was helped to bed by Madge's loving hands.

The next day Dora was seriously ill, tossing about from side to side in the wild delirium of fever. So Madge gave up her tuitions, and took her place by her darling's bedside.

The girl talked strangely at times, uttered words that would surely have told anyone near the real state of affairs. She revealed her love for Lord Ashfield, her affection for Sylvia, and the false position she occupied. All this Madge wished to keep secret; so she stayed with the patient night and day, allowing no one to approach her but herself.

This grieved Sylvia. She loved Dora, and longed to help to nurse her. But Madge was stern; she would admit no one, and Sylvia was obliged to content herself with making inquiries at the door, and sending delicacies that might tempt the poor invalid to eat.

Lord Ashfield came constantly to De Vere Gardens. Madge was touched by his evident anxiety about Dora, and felt sorry when she saw the great love he bore her. His extreme earnestness and nobility of character, his kind and thoughtful ways, won her heart, and impressed her with a thorough belief in his goodness.

"What a noble fellow he is! How gladly would I give my darling to him!" she thought, after one of his many visits. "And if she gets well, perhaps"—

But then, with a thrill of pain, she would remember the barrier that Dora had placed between herself and happiness. For, to Madge's honest mind, a promise was as binding as an oath. Without Dora's co-operation her hands were tied. She was not bound to silence by any promise, but she was powerless. She could do nothing. Her speaking would be utterly useless, unless Dora were free to stand beside her, and vouch for the truth of her story. This she could not

do now, and she could see nothing but sorrow and disappointment for the poor girl in her future life.

For many days Dora was in imminent peril, and Madge was wild with grief. She watched her every movement with a heart full of pain, and offered fervent prayers to God that He would be merciful and spare her darling. Then, at last, the fever passed away, and the patient came slowly back to life. The doctors pronounced her out of danger, and gave great hopes of her ultimate recovery.

But her convalescence was long and trying. She seemed weary of living, and expressed neither wish nor hope that she might grow stronger. This apathy filled Madge with terror. What if her pet should fade away and die in spite of the doctors? And as she gazed at the girl, as she lay listless and indifferent upon the sofa, she longed for something to rouse and interest her.

Dora was now but the shadow of her former self. Her long golden hair had been cut close to her head; her figure had shrunk, and was thin to attenuation; her chest, always narrow, had a look of contraction painful to behold; her face was white and wan, and her lovely eyes were abnormally large, and surrounded with wide black circles.

During all this dreary time, the girl's friends were constant in their attentions. But Dora would see no one. She begged to be left alone. Nothing daunted, Sylvia continued to implore for admission, and after some time the invalid yielded, and allowed her to pay

her a visit. The sight of the girl's beautiful face did her good, and renewed the deep affection she had always had for her. Sir Eustace speedily followed in his grand-daughter's footsteps, and Dora received him with something like an expression of pleasure in her weary eyes.

"You must have change of air to brace you and set you up, my dear," he said. "Sylvia and I go down to Summerlands next week. You must come with us."

Dora protested feebly. She did not wish to leave home. Then Madge was appealed to. What did she think?

"I must ask the doctor, Sir Eustace. If he says it will agree with Dora, she shall go. I am sure it would be very good for her."

Change of air was exactly what she required, declared the doctor on his next visit, and Summerlands the place of all others that he would recommend. It was bracing and healthy.

So, notwithstanding Dora's disinclination to move, all arrangements were made, and it was resolved that within a few days she should travel down into Surrey, in a close carriage, with Sir Eustace and Sylvia. Madge, who had some affairs to settle in town, would follow in as short a time as possible. Meanwhile, she knew her darling would be in good hands and would be carefully and lovingly tended.

On the afternoon before the day of her departure for the country, Dora seemed restless and excited.

She appeared anxious to say something to Madge, yet apparently dreaded to speak.

Madge was busily occupied in packing, and did not at first notice the girl's nervous manner. But, after a time, something unusual in her appearance caused her to pause in her work, and then she remarked, with wonder, the burning spot upon each wan cheek.

"What is it, pet? Are you not feeling well?" she cried anxiously. "Shall we postpone this visit to Summerlands? You can go down with me. I'll write"—

"No, no, Madge. We must make no change. I am restless—that is all. I want to get away." She covered her face with her almost transparent hands. "I dread, yet long, to see Lord Ashfield."

"My darling!"

"You may, perhaps, see him, Madge, and I want you to tell him"—

The servant suddenly opened the door.

"If you please, Miss Neil, there is a gentleman outside, who wishes very particularly to see Miss Dora."

"A gentleman?"

"Yes, miss. Lord Ashfield."

Dora gave a little cry, and fell back upon her pillow.

"You shall not see him, dearest," cried Madge. "You must say that Miss Dora is not able to receive visitors, Mary. Or stay—I will speak to him myself."

"Madge!" Dora caught her dress and would not

let her go. "I must see him. Mary, admit Lord Ashfield."

"This is foolish. You are too ill—too weak, Dora."

"No; my joy will give me strength."

And it seemed as though she was right. For when Lord Ashfield took her hand, and asked her how she felt, she answered quietly that she was better, and begged him to sit down.

Madge could not but wonder at this sudden change. All trace of nervousness had vanished. The feverish colour had faded from her cheeks, and she was now white as alabaster. And in her eyes was a look of peace, an expression of content, that Madge had not seen in them for months.

"She loves him, ah, how dearly, my poor darling!" she thought, with anguish. "How will it all end?" And, unable to check the rising tears, she hurried from the room.

When Lord Ashfield found himself face to face with this girl, whom he tenderly loved, he was deeply agitated. He was shocked at her appearance. He had not met her since that afternoon at the Atherstones', when she had touched him greatly by the beautiful pathos of her song. And now— But he soon recovered his usual calm demeanour, and Dora had not a notion of what he suffered.

"My God! what a change these weeks of illness have made in this poor child!" he thought. "Will she ever be strong? Could care, love, and affection

bring roses to her cheeks, strength and health to her limbs?"

But Dora's sweet voice disturbed his reverie, recalled him to himself.

"It is very good of you to come to see me, Lord Ashfield," she said. "But you were always kind and"—

"Good of me?" he cried passionately. "Oh, Dora, do you not know that I have been at your door morning and night? Do you not know that all my hopes of happiness are centred in your recovery—that, had you died, I—my life would have been a blank? for I love you, darling, and have but one wish on earth—to win you as my wife."

Dora gazed at him with dilated eyes and heightened colour. She tried to speak, but no sound came forth.

"Have you nothing to say, Dora? Have I startled you — frightened you by my eager words? You are weak. I should not have spoken so soon. But oh, my love, my love! these days have seemed long and weary, yearning as I have been to know my fate. Do you love me? Can you be my wife?"

Dora lowered her eyes. She could not bear to meet that tender, pleading glance. Her heart was his, but she dared not say so. Between them and happiness lay the secret of her birth, and the promise she had made never to reveal it.

"No," she said, and her words were so low that he had to bend forward to catch them; "I cannot be your wife."

Lord Ashfield staggered to his feet. His face was livid, his eyes full of sorrow and disappointment.

"Do you mean this?" he asked in tremulous accents. "Have I been deceived—have all my efforts been in vain? Do you not—could you not love me—even a little, my darling?"

The girl looked up, her face full of radiant light, her lips parted in a happy smile. "Oh yes, I love you dearly," she whispered low.

"Then," he cried, flinging himself on his knees by the couch, and taking her little hand in his, "why can you not marry me? If you love me, why do you hesitate?"

"Because"—Dora drew herself away from him—"I cannot, I dare not. There is a reason."

"A reason? My darling, surely that is impossible. If we love each other, what reason can there be to prevent our marriage? Tell me what it is. I"—

"I cannot," murmured Dora faintly. "It is a secret. Madge"—

"Madge!" he cried indignantly, and he spoke in such a loud tone that the girl believed he wanted her, and came in at once from the adjoining room.

"Did you call me, Lord Ashfield?"

"No; but as you are here, perhaps you can explain matters a little." And, leaving the sofa, he looked at her anxiously. As he did so, he felt strangely moved. Madge seemed in great sorrow. Her eyes were red as with much weeping.

"Explain what, Lord Ashfield?" she asked, glancing quickly at Dora.

"I have asked your sister to marry me," he said, with deep emotion. "I love her with all my soul. She—I thank God for it—confesses that she returns my love, but declares she cannot marry me, and that there is some secret reason why our marriage should never take place. She mentioned you; can you tell me what it is?"

"Your mother can give you all the information you require, Lord Ashfield, if she chooses."

"Madge!" Dora stared at her in surprise. "You cannot wish Lady Ashfield to do that?"

"I would wish her to do anything that will end this mystery, and, perhaps, lead to your happiness, dearest. Lord Ashfield is generous; he would spare his friends, I am sure."

Lord Ashfield started violently. He felt perplexed and annoyed. What was this mystery? Why should he be generous? Was it possible there was any disgrace attached to these girls, who had always seemed so perfect in his eyes. No; that could not be. Such a thing was impossible; and yet—

He looked earnestly at Dora; but she had turned away her head, and was weeping silently upon her pillow. This sight filled him with compassion. He remembered only his love.

"My darling," he cried, "do not weep. Keep this secret, whatever it may be; I can trust both you and Madge; so look up, Dora, and say you will be my wife."

Dora made no response. Her slight frame was shaken with sobs, but she did not take any notice of his fervent prayer.

"My sister has already been tried beyond her strength, Lord Ashfield," said Madge sadly. "She is too weak for a scene of this kind. She has given you the only answer it is in her power to give. To marry you with this secret in her heart would be fatal to your happiness. She is not now at liberty to reveal it."

"But my mother—she knows all? Ah! a light breaks in upon me. It was because of this that you —that my mother quarrelled with you the first time she saw you."

Madge blushed deeply, but she raised her head proudly, and looked at Lord Ashfield.

"Yes, it was, partly. Lady Ashfield would not believe my word."

"Then this secret is connected with you, not Dora?"

"Pray ask no more, Lord Ashfield; it is Dora's wish and your mother's that I should be silent. But this secret must surely leak out sooner or later. However, in the meanwhile, please believe that there is nothing to be ashamed of in it; nothing the least disgraceful to either Dora or me"—

"I can well believe that," he cried. "And now good-bye. I must see my mother, and implore her to reveal this secret to me at once. When I know all Dora may then consent to be my wife."

"I hope so most sincerely; but Lady Ashfield has other views for you—she may not be willing to tell you all she knows."

"She must. My mother and I do not always agree in small matters, but I generally manage to make her do what I wish."

CHAPTER XXIII

LADY ASHFIELD CHANGES HER TACTICS

This scene with Lord Ashfield tried Dora severely, and the next morning she was too ill to make the journey to Summerlands. Sir Eustace and Sylvia would not go without her, and postponed their going until she should be able to accompany them.

But after two days of complete rest, she declared herself eager to depart, and, to the great delight of her friends, seemed brighter and more interested in everything than she had been since the beginning of her illness.

The reason of this sudden change was known only to herself and Madge. And it brought much happiness to both, but particularly to Dora. For now she felt she had something to live for—something to keep in her own heart and rejoice over. This was the knowledge that Lord Ashfield loved her, and was anxious to take her just as she was, without fortune or name—a mere waif cast up by the sea, and make her his wife. She had refused him because of the secret of her life. But he loved her—that was sufficient. She could wait patiently for whatever time might bring about or reveal.

And so, though thin and wan, weak almost to prostration, Dora wore an expression of peaceful happiness as she was carried down to Sir Eustace's carriage.

"God bless you, my pet!" whispered Madge, as she covered her with rugs and arranged the cushions under her back. "I trust this journey may not tire you too much."

"I think not, dear. I feel so happy, and quite excited."

"Do not be uneasy, Madge," said Sylvia. "She seems so much better that I am sure the drive will not hurt her. Grandpapa and I will look after her well."

"I am sure you will, dear. You are all that is good and kind."

And, acting on a sudden impulse, Madge stooped and kissed Sylvia on the lips. This was the second time she had embraced her since the night of the wreck, when she had clasped her in her arms in terror and alarm. On the first occasion, on the beach at Seaport, she did not know that the child was her sister. But now, she was well aware of that fact, and her heart felt full of love for this girl, whom she had once guarded with so much tender affection.

For an instant Sylvia was surprised at this unexpected show of friendship from Madge, who was generally very reserved. Then, smiling, she put her arms round her neck and returned her embrace with warmth.

Madge burst into tears, shook Sir Eustace by the hand, and hurried back into the house.

"Poor Madge! she cannot bear to lose you even for a day, Dora," said Sylvia, as the carriage bore them swiftly on their way. "She is truly a loving sister."

"Yes," said Dora tenderly; "Madge has a heart of gold."

Meanwhile Madge returned to her room, and, having recovered her usual calm, began to arrange wardrobes and drawers that had been upset in her preparations for Dora's departure. She worked long and steadily, and by lunch-time everything was in order, and she was free to take that meal in peace before going out to pay some visits.

But as she sat at her solitary luncheon, she had little appetite. The room seemed lonely and deserted. She missed Dora from her sofa, and wondered sadly when she should see her flitting about again in her pretty dresses and dainty ribbons. She and her sister had been very happy in this comfortable home that Sir Eustace had provided for them, and she could not bear to think that this time of peace was at an end, perhaps for ever. And yet, as she sat alone, she could not rid herself of a strange, unaccountable presentiment that such was the case. A crisis had come in their lives. Dora and she would never be to each other what they had been in the days gone by. Lord Ashfield loved her darling, and she returned his affection. Therefore she must soon lose her.

Dora was resolved not to marry him till this secret was made known to him. But would she have strength to hold out against his powerful will? He was determined she should be his, and sooner or later he would surely conquer.

"There would be one happy way of settling this matter," she thought. "But, alas! I fear it is too much to expect. That is, if Lady Ashfield would tell her son the story of the wreck, and that he should insist on saying nothing about it—on leaving Sylvia as she is, and marrying Dora under the name she has borne so long. My wish to depose the present Sylvia has passed away. Her goodness and beauty have won my heart. And it seems cruel to disturb her—to endanger her happiness. Heigh ho! if we had only never known her, never loved her, we might have worked against her without pain. But now"—

"A note for you, Miss Neil. The messenger is waiting for an answer," said the servant, entering the room at this moment.

Madge took the letter and glanced at its contents. It was short, and ran thus—

"My dear Miss Neil,—Can you come to me about half-past three? I want to speak to you very particularly. Kindly tell the servant yes or no. Yours sincerely, Hermione Ashfield."

The girl's dark brows met together in a frown. She had not seen Lady Ashfield since she had visited

her in her lodgings, and had extracted the fatal promise from poor little Dora. She had not forgotten that scene, and found it hard to forgive this great lady for her insulting language on that occasion. Her first impulse, therefore, on reading this note was to refuse to see her ladyship, or listen to what she had to say. But when she reflected that by doing so she might perhaps interfere with Dora's future happiness, she resolved to face Lady Ashfield, no matter what the interview might cost her.

"Tell the messenger yes," she said to the servant. "I will be with Lady Ashfield at the hour she names."

At half-past three precisely, Madge rang the bell at 16 Belgrave Street. The door was quickly opened, and the footman led her at once to Lady Ashfield's boudoir.

"My dear Miss Neil, how extremely good of you to come to me so punctually," cried Lady Ashfield, rising from her chair, and coming forward with outstretched hands. "I am very glad to see you."

"Thank you," said Madge coldly. "But may I ask why you sent for me?"

"Certainly. But pray be seated. I have just been writing to Summerlands—to Dora."

"To Dora?"

"Yes; to Dora. But I do not see that that need astonish you." Lady Ashfield smoothed the folds of her dress, and kept her eyes well away from the girl's face. "My son tells me he wishes to marry her, therefore I"—

Madge started forward with smiling countenance.

"You have told him the story of the wreck, and, resolving to keep it a secret known only to ourselves, have given your consent to his marriage with Dora? Oh, Lady Ashfield, this is really kind! It is what I hoped—but"—

"Not so fast, my dear Miss Neil; you misunderstand me quite. I wish my son to marry Sir Eustace Atherstone's heiress, and it matters little to me whether she is tall and dark, or small and fair. Money and birth are what I require; so I have written to Dora to release her from her promise of keeping this matter a secret. As soon as she proves without doubt that she is George Atherstone's daughter, I give my consent to her marriage with Lord Ashfield—not before."

"And what if she refuses to put forward her claim?"

"Then she may remain Dorothy Neil for the rest of her life. But I am not afraid. The love she professes for Sylvia will not carry her quite so far. She is not likely to sacrifice a brilliant future as Lord Ashfield's wife to an absurd idea of sparing this usurper pain."

Madge gazed at her in sad surprise.

"You spoke quite differently, Lady Ashfield, on our first meeting in this room. You then treated me with scorn, refused to believe my story, and talked a great deal about your love for Sir Eustace and Sylvia."

Lady Ashfield coloured slightly.

"It was only natural I should doubt the truth of such a strange announcement," she said quickly, "and my friendship for Sir Eustace made me think of it with terror. I did not wish to believe it. You and your sister were nothing to me; Sylvia and her grandfather were much. But now everything is changed. My son wishes to marry Dora. It is necessary she should prove herself his equal in birth and fortune."

"Then what do you wish me to do?"

"I wish you to go to Sir Eustace, tell him your story, and bring forth all the proofs you possess."

"They are few—utterly valueless, you told me yourself."

"I was wrong. I have thought it all out, and come to that conclusion. George Atherstone's wife was fair; that portrait, and Dora's likeness to it, may prove strong evidence."

"And if Sir Eustace does not believe me? If he refuses to cast forth the girl he has loved and cherished as his own for the sake of a comparative stranger—what then?"

"We must go to law, hunt up Anne Dane and have her examined and cross-examined—leave no stone unturned till we restore Dora to her rights."

"And for this purpose am I to use the money bestowed upon me by our generous benefactor? Are we to turn upon him, and, with his own gold, work his misery and unhappiness?"

"Your manner is theatrical, as usual, Miss Neil," said Lady Ashfield, with a harsh little laugh. "But I do not wish you to use Sir Eustace's money. I am quite willing to bear all the expenses."

"You are very generous. But tell me—does Lord Ashfield wish this to be done? Is he ready to enter upon this law-suit?"

Lady Ashfield shrugged her shoulders.

"I shall not consult him about the matter. He is quixotic to the last degree. This morning, when he told me of his wish to marry Dora, I thought it right to let him know that she claimed to be Sir Eustace Atherstone's grand-daughter. He seemed overjoyed at the news. He now knew the terrible secret, he cried, that had made the girl refuse to become his wife. He was delighted when I acknowledged that that was the reason, and declared that it was of no importance, and should not stand in the way of their union. 'But,' I said, 'you will surely take steps to restore her to her proper position. You cannot marry her till the world knows she is not a mere dressmaker's apprentice supported by Sir Eustace, but his son's only child, and heir to a large fortune.'"

"And he replied?" asked Madge eagerly.

"That he would take no such steps. That he loved Dora, etc., and that he cared nothing for money or birth. Just what I expected from his radical ideas. However, I shall not ask his opinion now, but set to work at once. With your help"—

"That I must decline to give, Lady Ashfield."

"What?" She glared angrily at Madge. "You do not, you cannot mean what you say?"

"I do mean it most decidedly. I am thankful, God only knows how thankful, that Lord Ashfield has shown himself so generous in this matter. Had he acted otherwise, he would have been unworthy of my sweet Dora."

"Are you a fool, Miss Neil, or mad," cried Lady Ashfield, "that you talk in this absurd fashion?"

"Pardon me," said Madge gravely. "I am neither mad nor a fool. But I am glad that this world is not all selfish and grasping; glad, above all, that the man who is about to wed her whom I have loved as a sister all these long years, is full of kind impulses, untainted by worldly feelings and a sordid love of money."

"You speak with wonderful indifference about these matters, now that my son has proposed for your sister," said Lady Ashfield, with a contemptuous sneer. "If you will not, and do not, prove the truth of your story, I will look upon you as a most arrant impostor. For, unless you are, why should you have changed so suddenly? A year ago you were all eagerness to depose Sylvia and put Dora in her place, and now, forsooth, you would not pain her or her grandfather."

"A year ago I did not love Sylvia—I did not know her—she was a mere name to me; and my sweet Dora was ill and in want. I had not accepted favours innumerable from the hands of Sir Eustace Atherstone; he was an utter stranger to me. I was

not held back by any feeling of pity for people I did not know. I thought only of Dora. I felt bound to do all I could to have her acknowledged as George Atherstone's daughter. Now all is changed. My hands are tied—the two people who are most concerned in the matter, Dora and Lord Ashfield, wish it kept a secret. Until they ask me to reveal what I know, not a word shall escape me; so I think, Lady Ashfield, you have little chance of proving your case."

"Little," she said grimly, "and I am not quite fool enough to try. But I tell you solemnly that until Dora is proclaimed to be Sylvia Atherstone, I shall never consent to her marriage with my son."

"Lord Ashfield is of age. He can do as he pleases."

"True. But I hold money he cannot touch. Should he displease me, I can will it away, leaving him an impoverished peer, with little but his title to recommend him."

"That is a question that does not concern me," said Madge coldly, "but must be settled between you and Lord Ashfield. And now, as you thoroughly understand my feelings and intentions, I shall wish you good-day."

"Good-day." Lady Ashfield bowed stiffly, and rang the bell.

Madge returned her salutation with dignity, and walked quietly from the room.

CHAPTER XXIV

AT BAY

THE journey to Summerlands was accomplished without incident. It was a beautiful April day, warm, bright, and clear. And as Dora drove along, she felt herself grow stronger every moment, as the fresh air came in at the carriage window and fanned her pallid cheek. Sylvia and Sir Eustace were well pleased to see her look so brisk, and teased her playfully about her returning health and spirits.

For some time their way lay through streets and squares, across Clapham Common, and down miles of roads lined with suburban villas. But at last the region of brick and mortar was left behind, and they found themselves in the country. On all sides were green fields, hedges budding into leaf, and wide stretches of downs covered with sheep and merry, frisking lambs.

Dora was in ecstasy, and gazed at everything with evident delight.

"It is pleasant to be in the country," she cried. "It was so good of you to bring me, Sir Eustace. But then, you have been so kind to Madge and me, that we shall never, never be able to thank you."

"My dear child, do not talk of kindness," he answered, smiling. "It is a pleasure to me to be able to do anything for you. Sylvia and I love you dearly, and rejoice to have you with us. Eh, Sylvia?"

"Yes, grandpapa. Indeed we do. Dora is to be my sister now. I am determined to keep her with me as much as I can."

"Madge will object to giving her up so very often. She loves her too well, not to want her at home."

"And she shall have her sometimes," said Sylvia, laughing, "if she is good. But Madge shall come and stay a long time also, I hope. Summerlands is a large house, remember. We have plenty of room there."

"So we have — or rather you have," said Sir Eustace, bowing; "for I must not forget that I am your guest down here, my darling. Dora, Summerlands belongs to Sylvia. She is our hostess. So we must be very respectful to such a great personage."

"Grandpapa, you are a tease."

"Tease? My dear, is it not true? Did I not buy this place for you, and you alone?"

"Yes, but I refuse to have anything to do with it till"— She paused and blushed.

"Till you are married?"

"No, not even then. Not till you require it no more. And I hope—oh, so sincerely!—that that may not be for years and years to come."

"Good little girl! You would miss your old grandpapa? His love is of great value in your eyes?"

"Grandpapa, I'd rather have your love—the knowledge that I was your own best beloved grand-daughter, than all the riches and all the Summerlands ever heard of in the whole world."

"You hear, Dora?" he said in a voice full of proud delight. "What a loving little girl this is!"

"Yes," replied Dora, smiling, "she is a devoted grand-daughter, Sir Eustace."

"Devoted indeed, and her devotion is fully returned. There is nothing I would not do for my Sylvia. Her love has been a precious boon to me, and every day I thank God on my knees that Anne Dane was able to rescue her from a watery grave, and place her safe and well within my arms."

"Oh," thought Dora, with beating heart, "who would, who could bring trouble to these two? Who would disturb their happy love, and show them in what a cruel manner they have been deceived? I certainly could not. I'd rather die."

"You look sad, little Dora," said Sylvia, laying her hand caressingly on that of the invalid. "Are you getting tired?"

"No, not at all; but I was thinking, Sylvia, of that strange, sad night on board *The Cimbria*."

"But you cannot remember it? I cannot."

"I seem to remember it dimly," answered Dora thoughtfully. "At least, I think I do. But then, Madge and I have talked it over so often, that perhaps I only fancy I do. But, Sylvia, what became of Anne Dane? Is she dead?"

"Dead?" Sylvia laughed merrily. "Not at all. She is as well as possible, although she sometimes fancies herself somewhat weak, poor old dear. She hates London fogs, and leads a life of comfort, and, I am afraid, idleness at grandpapa's place in Lancashire. However, you shall have the happiness of seeing her soon. I have invited her to Summerlands expressly to meet you."

"Sylvia!" Dora turned pale; a look of terror came into her eyes.

"Well, dear, I thought you'd like to see her for the sake of old times."

"Yes, yes, of course," said Dora quickly. "I would not know her again. But Madge"—

"Madge would remember her, of course; and I know she wants to see her. Lord Ashfield told me so long ago. I tried to get her to come up to town, I even told her it was to meet her old friend, Madge Neil. But she would not move. She is very careful of her health, I assure you."

"And did she promise to come to Summerlands to meet Madge?"

"No; that is the fun. I have prepared a pleasant surprise for her. She has not the slightest idea that either you or Madge will be there. I am longing to see her face when she sees you first."

"Sylvia, you have not done right," cried Dora, with emotion. "You have not indeed."

Sir Eustace and Sylvia looked at her in astonishment.

"Not done right? My dear Dora, what can you mean?" they cried together.

"Nothing, nothing," said the girl in confusion. "But Anne is old. It will be a shock to see us without warning."

"As for that," replied Sylvia gaily, "you need not be alarmed. Anne is not easily startled. And then, you know, she has heard long ago that you were saved from the wreck. So she will not take you for ghosts, dear. However, lest you should be uneasy, I shall send for Anne, and tell her of your arrival. Will that satisfy you?"

"Yes," answered Dora dreamily; "that may avert some of the danger I dread. But I must write to Madge and warn her."

"Well, dear, do as you like," said Sylvia. "But, imagining others as weak as yourself, I think you exaggerate the importance of the meeting. Madge will take it very quietly, I am sure."

"Perhaps so; I hope so, dearest. And, of course, I am very weak, and easily alarmed."

"You have talked too much, dear child," said Sir Eustace kindly. "Your voice sounds tired, so close your eyes and go to sleep."

"Yes, I think I have," she answered, with a faint smile. "I feel very weary."

"Poor darling! it was a shame to let you wear yourself out," cried Sylvia. "I am very angry with myself for allowing you to do so, and now you must not speak again. Lie back there, and close your eyes."

Dora did as she was told, and with a sinking heart thought sadly of this fresh complication in their affairs. She felt bewildered and alarmed. A meeting between Anne Dane and Madge was to be avoided above all things. And now, Sylvia, in her innocence and ignorance, in hopes of giving a pleasant surprise to her friends, had planned to bring it about in the most dangerous manner possible.

"I am thankful Madge did not come with us," she thought, "for I shall have time to warn her, and, perhaps, induce Anne Dane to go. She will be anxious to guard the secret for her own sake. That was, of course, the reason she did not come to town. Oh, Sylvia, Sylvia, how imprudently you have acted!"

"I hope you are rested, dear, and able to look about," said Sylvia's sweet voice, about half an hour later. "Here we are at Summerlands. Is it not beautiful?"

Dora raised herself a little, and opened her eyes. The carriage had passed through a fine old gateway of richly-wrought iron, and entered an immense park, full of elms and oaks of ancient lineage. The grass was green and mossy, carpeted now, on this lovely spring day, with primroses and violets. Herds of deer browsed upon the slopes and looked up indolently as the noise of wheels disturbed their solitude. Far down, below the undulating lands, lay a large lake, its waters sparkling brightly in the sunshine; and above its banks, their outline clearly marked against the sky, rose the beautifully wooded range of the Surrey hills.

"It is lovely—a paradise on earth!" cried Dora. "Oh, Sylvia, what happiness to know that this is all your own! How you would suffer, were it ever taken from you!"

"I daresay. Yes, I am sure it would be real pain, for I love the place," said Sylvia. Then, smiling at Sir Eustace, "I am not uneasy; grandpapa's word is as good as any deed of settlement. And even my father will have no right to touch it, I believe."

"Certainly not," said Sir Eustace. "This house and estate are mentioned in my will as belonging to my grand-daughter, Sylvia Atherstone, and her heirs for ever. Neither George nor any other living creature can ever lay a finger on them. It will belong only to Sylvia, her husband, and her children."

"I don't think anybody is likely to wish to take it from me, grandpapa," said Sylvia, laughing. "So you and Dora need not alarm yourselves."

"I feel no alarm, dearest," he replied, smiling. "It is yours as securely as the law of England can make it."

Dora sighed and looked out over the rich pasture lands.

How secure they were, these two! How unsuspicious of evil! And yet what a terrible sword hung suspended over their heads, threatening every moment to fall and crush them with sorrow.

"Never, with my sanction, shall this secret be revealed," resolved Dora bravely. "But, alas! too many know it now. And how can I tell what course Lady Ashfield may pursue?"

The carriage stopped. They had reached their destination. Sir Eustace opened the door and sprang out.

"Welcome to Summerlands, my pretty Dora!" he cried. "May you grow strong and rosy in our beautiful country air."

"Thank you," she answered in a low voice. "I will do my best to show my gratitude for your love and Sylvia's."

"That is right," he cried gaily. "The best way you can do so is by growing as healthy as possible."

"And in order to accomplish that," said Sylvia, "she must rest. She must not tire herself now, so she shall be carried to her room at once."

"I think I can walk, dear, if you will help me," said Dora. "I feel quite able to do so."

"Very well; take my arm," said Sir Eustace. "You go to the other side, Sylvia, and we'll help her slowly up between us."

The staircase at Summerlands was broad and low, and with the assistance of her friends Dora reached her room without much fatigue. Nevertheless, she was glad to lie down on the sofa and rest, until it was time for lunch.

"See," said Sylvia, when Sir Eustace had withdrawn, and the two girls were alone, "this is your sitting-room—in there your bedroom; and here," raising a heavy curtain, "is my boudoir. I thought it would be nice to be near each other."

"Delightful!" cried Dora; "and you must not leave

me much alone, Sylvia. I do not want to be too great a nuisance, but I hope you will come to me often, dear."

"Of course, constantly. And as we are only separated by a curtain, I can slip in at all kinds of odd moments. I shall make no noise; and if you are asleep, I shall creep out again, without disturbing you."

"Thoughtful little Sylvia! You are too good to me, for"—

"My darling, as if that were possible! But good-bye for the present. I must go and look after grandpapa. Désirée shall bring you your lunch directly. I hope you don't feel too warm, but I thought it best to have a fire in your room, as the evenings are chilly."

"It is very pleasant, dear. I felt cold after my drive."

"I thought you would. Be sure and eat all you can, Dora, and remember you must drink your Carlowitz. I ordered it specially for you."

"I shall not fail to do so. You play the part of head nurse admirably, my fair Sylvia. And I am resolved to please you by strict obedience to your orders."

"That is right. An obedient patient is sure soon to be a complete cure. We shall have you running gaily all over the house directly."

True to her promise, Dora did her best to eat the dainty lunch that Désirée placed before her; but her appetite was small, and when the tray was carried

away, the amount of chicken consumed was scarcely noticeable.

At three o'clock Sylvia looked in, dressed in her outdoor things.

"I am going for a walk with grandpapa, Dora. He wants me to see some improvements at the farm. I hope you will not feel lonely whilst I am away?"

"Not at all. I will take my afternoon sleep. Do not hurry on my account. I shall be quite happy."

"Very well, dear. Sleep will do you good."

Then Sylvia kissed her tenderly, and, drawing on her gloves, went to join Sir Eustace.

After a time Désirée came in, and put some fresh coal on the fire, and, hoping that mademoiselle would soon fall asleep, left her alone.

But Dora could not sleep; she felt restless and unsettled. Her mind was full of the thought of Anne Dane and her meeting with Madge. The advent of this woman filled her with terror, a sense of danger that she could not shake off.

"But, really, I am foolish to think so much about her," she said to herself. "If Madge is warned, all will be well. She will not come, I am sure, when she hears that Anne Dane is here; she could not meet her in a friendly spirit, and she now wishes to spare Sylvia and Sir Eustace. I will greet her quietly, be cold and distant in my manner, and say nothing about the wreck. But Madge could never do that; the sight of the woman would make her forget everything but my wrongs. Oh, mother, mother!" she cried,

drawing forth her beloved miniature, and pressing it to her lips; "what sad straits I am in! Kept out of my birthright, my lawful inheritance, longing to be restored to the position that should be mine, for the sake of the man I love, yet prevented from proclaiming my right to it by the affection and gratitude I feel towards those who have been so good and kind to me."

Then, as the daylight wanes, a feeling of weariness takes possession of Dora, and she falls into an uneasy slumber. Evening comes on, the fire blazes up, and the flames play fitfully upon her worn cheeks, and touch her golden hair with their brilliant light.

Presently, the door opens slowly, and a stealthy footstep approaches the sofa. Dora does not hear—is unconscious to all around, till a hand is laid upon her bosom, and she dreams that someone is trying to wrest her mother's portrait from her neck.

Then she awakes with a start; and, opening her eyes, sees an elderly woman bending over her, and feels her hot breath upon her face.

"Who are you?" she asks indignantly. "How dare you touch me."

The woman does not reply, but gazes fixedly at the girl.

All at once, a light breaks in upon Dora. This is the nurse who betrayed her master's trust. This is the creature who had thrust them all into their present false position. As this flashes quickly through her mind, she raises herself on her pillow, and, grasping the

miniature firmly with one hand, she pushes the unwelcome visitor away with the other.

"I know who you are now," she cried breathlessly. "You are Anne Dane."

"And what if I am," replied the woman, with a sneer. "Who are you?"

"I?" Dora looked at her with reproachful eyes. "I am the poor little infant you left to perish on board the *Cimbria*."

"You rave!" cried Anne, her voice growing hoarse and loud in her anger. "My master's child was my only care. I saved her. That was all I could be expected to do."

"And that you did not do. You know, and Madge Neil knows, that I am Sylvia Atherstone, whilst the child you saved from the wreck was Dorothy Neil."

Anne became livid with passion, and she raised her hand as though to strike the girl before her. But Dora shrank away with a cry, and the woman let her arm fall once more to her side.

"If you say that again," she hissed, "I might—I am sure I would kill you."

"No, no," said Dora, recovering quickly from her fright; "you are not wicked enough for that, bad as you are. But you cannot deny my statement. You know it is true. Now confess—is it not exactly as I say? Am I not Sir Eustace Atherstone's granddaughter, and is this not the portrait of my mother?"

Anne glared at her fiercely, and tried to snatch the miniature from her hand.

"You lie," she cried. "You and your sister have trumped up this story. But no one will ever believe it; and if you even hint at such a thing, Sir Eustace will drive you from his door."

"Perhaps so. But now confess, Anne Dane, am I not the real Sylvia Atherstone? And do you not feel bound to acknowledge here, between ourselves, that the little girl you placed in Sir Eustace Atherstone's arms was not his granddaughter, but the child of a stranger, and Madge Neil's sister?"

"I will confess nothing."

The woman's words were frozen on her lips; she trembled in every limb. For there in the doorway, her face white as marble, her eyes full of wild terror, stood her young mistress.

Sylvia clung to the curtain that separated her room from Dora's, as though afraid to fall. She did not speak, but looked from one to the other, with an expression of intense agony.

Dora covered her face with her hands, and uttered an exclamation of dismay. Anne turned away, and seemed about to leave the room.

But Sylvia waved her back. Trembling violently, the woman obeyed, and stood in silent anger before the suffering girl.

"Anne Dane, is this statement true?"

Sylvia's voice was low and hoarse, her words scarcely audible; but they seemed to burn into the brains of those who heard them. Anne did not reply;

her eyes were fixed upon the ground; she knew not what to answer.

"Speak! Is this story an invention?" insisted her mistress; "or is it true? Is she Sylvia Atherstone, or am I?"

Anne laughed wildly.

"My dear Miss Sylvia," she cried, recovering her self-possession, "can you believe such nonsense for an instant? This girl and her sister have made up this story between them. Look how ashamed she is. Try her, ask her to swear to the truth of it, and you will see that she dare not."

Dora shivered; she could not speak. She would not destroy her dear friend's happiness; and yet she could not tell a lie: so she gazed steadily at the fire and uttered not a single word.

Sylvia gazed at her longingly. Oh, if she would only look up and say that it was all untrue! If she, herself, could awake and find that it was only a dream! But, alas, she was not asleep. And there she stood, with this hateful story torturing her mind and filling her heart with sorrow.

"I do not believe that either Madge or Dora would willingly wrong me," she said sadly. "They would be incapable of inventing such a lie as this would be, were it not true."

"Of course," cried Anne, "they would not do such a thing, for I have heard they are both as good as gold. But probably poor Madge's head was turned the night of the wreck (it was an awful

experience), and she fancied her sister went in the boat along with me. That's just what it is, Miss Sylvia; and this girl, who was an infant at the time, naturally knows nothing about it, but believes what she has been told."

Sylvia watched Anne closely. But the woman's countenance was inscrutable. She looked perfectly honest; all her nervousness had disappeared, and she talked with the greatest coolness and decision.

"I wish I could believe you," said Sylvia, sighing. "But I can't, and yet"—

"But you must," she cried eagerly. "What I tell you is true. You must forget all that you have heard this girl say. It was nonsense. So please forget it."

"Yes," — Dora clasped her hands and looked imploringly at Sylvia,—"forget it—forget it. Oh, my darling, I was so determined not to speak! And had I known you were there, I would not have spoken. I would not pain you for the world."

And, bowing her head, she burst into an agony of weeping. Sylvia knelt by her sofa and put her arms round her.

"Dearest, I know that. And for that reason I cannot imagine that you would have said what I heard you say to Anne, unless you believed it to be true."

"Yes—I—that is"—stammered Dora. "But pray do not think about it. I never, never would have spoken, only that woman made me forget my resolutions, and filled me with rage and indignation by trying"—

Anne made an angry sign, and Dora paused abruptly.

"Well, dear," questioned Sylvia, "what did she try to do?"

"Never mind, dearest," replied Dora, laying her cheek caressingly against Sylvia's. "I only spoke because I thought we were alone. And, believe me, you *are* now Sylvia Atherstone. All the world knows you as such, and I am content to remain your friend, Dorothy Neil. Put everything else out of your head. But — oh! — I feel — strange. Sylvia — where are you?"

And with a little sigh, Dora fainted away.

Sylvia laid her back tenderly on her pillow, and, opening the window, let in some fresh air.

"Poor darling, this scene has tried her sorely," she murmured, as she fanned her gently. "Poor dear little Dora!"

And as she bent lovingly over the unconscious girl, Anne Dane darted an angry glance at her, and slipped unnoticed from the room.

At last Dora opened her eyes, and looked wildly round.

"Oh," she cried, grasping Sylvia's hand, "are you there? I thought, I believed you had gone, and that you hated me now."

"My darling, why should I hate you? If your story is true, 'tis you who should hate me."

"No, no. You have done no harm. But I, like a traitor, have crept into your home, and into your love,

and then have destroyed your happiness and peace. Forgive me, Sylvia, forgive me!"

And, sobbing convulsively, Dora hid her face in her pillow.

"Dora, you must not make yourself ill again. Pray be calm, dearest," said Sylvia soothingly. "You have not destroyed my happiness, although you have disturbed my peace. But it is right that this story should be made known and thoroughly sifted. You and Madge should have told us sooner. Grandpapa" —her voice broke a little, her lips trembled—"must hear it at once, and make all necessary inquiries."

"Sylvia—oh, do not tell him! If you only knew how anxious I—we have been to keep it from him—from you."

"And in that you were wrong. But now, let us say no more about this matter at present. You are tired. You must try to get some rest."

Sylvia rang the bell, and Désirée appeared.

"Miss Neil wishes to go to bed," she said. "Please see that her room is ready."

"Sylvia," whispered Dora, as the maid went into the adjoining chamber, "tell me that you forgive me —that I—that you love me still."

"My darling!"

Sylvia clasped her in her arms, and kissed her tenderly on lips and brow.

"There is nothing to forgive, Dora. It is not your fault. And I love you as dearly as ever."

CHAPTER XXV

DO THEY SPEAK THE TRUTH?

Some two hours later Sylvia sat in the library, at her grandfather's feet. Her face was pale and sad, her eyes red with weeping. In Dora's presence, lest her sorrows should cause the girl pain, she had made a violent effort to appear calm and unconcerned.

But once away from this restraining influence, the full horror of the situation seized her, and her soul was torn with grief and alarm.

Sylvia had never been vain of her personal attractions. But she was proud, though almost unconsciously so—proud of her noble family, her aristocratic name, her ancient lineage. It pleased her to remember that she was Sir Eustace Atherstone's grand-daughter; and she felt a just pride in the courtly old gentleman, whom she loved with an absorbing affection. And so, as she left Dora's room, this cruel story of the wreck standing out in all its hideous reality before her mind, the thought that she must fall from her high estate, that henceforth she would have no right to the name she bore, filled her with anguish.

In the solitude of her pretty boudoir she wrestled

long and fiercely with her grief. She felt no anger against Dora or Madge. But the recollection of Anne Dane's deceitful conduct enraged and embittered her.

"But she denied the story. It may be false after all," she cried. "And yet—oh, my God! I fear, I fear it must be true; and if it is, I must leave my home, my name, my father, grandfather, Summerlands, and become poor, dependent Dorothy Neil. Oh, it is cruel—cruel!"

And, overcome with misery, Sylvia flung herself weeping upon her bed.

"But it must be proved." She started up. "Grandpapa shall know all; and then it must be proved."

And without a thought as to her tear-stained face and tumbled hair, Sylvia rushed from her room, and, entering the library, flung her arms round her grandfather's neck, and there, pressed close to his heart, she sobbed out the whole sad story.

"I do not believe one word of this!" he cried indignantly, when she had finished,—"not for an instant. It is nonsense—a gross lie invented."

"But, grandpapa, you forget who tells the story—Dora."

He paled slightly.

"True, dearest. Dora is too good, too sweet, too—But, my love, I cannot, I will not believe it."

"Alas!" she said mournfully; "it is not enough to say that we do not believe it. Either it is true or false. But to prove one or the other, we must make

inquiries, find out everything we can, and have it settled finally at once."

"You are right, darling. It must not be said that we were afraid to face the truth. A story like this is sure to get noised abroad, sooner or later. So at the very first we must stamp it as false."

"Yes, but how, grandpapa?"

"You shall see, pet." He rang the bell. "And now, do not weep any more, sweet Sylvia. We shall soon learn without doubt that this story is an absurd fabrication."

The footman appeared at the door.

"Send Anne Dane here at once," said Sir Eustace.

"Ah! you are going to question her," cried Sylvia. "But Anne is unsatisfactory, grandpapa. She"—

"If you please, Sir Eustace," said the servant, coming into the room again, "Anne Dane is not in the house."

"Not in the house?"

"No, Sir Eustace."

"Have you looked in her room, John?" asked Sylvia. "She must be there."

"No, miss, she is not."

"She cannot be far off," cried his young mistress impatiently. "I saw her in Miss Neil's room about an hour and a half ago."

"Yes, miss. But she went away since then."

Sylvia sprang to her feet.

"Went away? Do you mean to say that she has left Summerlands?"

"Yes, Miss Atherstone. About an hour ago one

of the housemaids met her going down the back stairs with a carpet-bag in her hand. She was surprised, as she knew Anne had only just arrived. So she asked her where she was going. She seemed angry, and would not answer at first, but passed on. Then she suddenly turned back and said, 'I am going for a long holiday. Miss Sylvia does not want me at present, so I am going for a holiday.' And she went on in a great hurry."

"That will do, John; you may go."

Sir Eustace spoke calmly. There was not a tremor in his voice. But he was very pale. And as the servant withdrew, he sank back in his chair with a deep groan.

A great terror had entered his mind. This woman's flight looked like guilt, and the horrible thought that this might after all be true forced itself upon him, notwithstanding his ardent longing to believe the contrary.

"Grandpapa!" cried Sylvia in a tone of anguish. "Oh, my darling, I see you think as I do. Anne has run away, because—because she dared not face the truth. Dora's story is true, and I am not your grand-daughter, not Sylvia Atherstone after all."

Sir Eustace took her in his arms, and, pressing her to his heart, kissed her long and passionately.

"You are my child, my daughter, my darling," he cried. "Nothing can change our love, Sylvia, after these long years. And even should they prove that you are not my son's daughter, what matter? You

will only be mine all the more—the child of my old age, my own sweet Sylvia."

"Nothing could change our love. Oh no," she answered, clinging to him. "But I should then have no right to that name, no right to call you grandpapa. In your house, where I have reigned as mistress, I should have no right to remain. If Dora is your grand-daughter, she must take my place."

"My darling, such a change must never be allowed," he cried fiercely. "You are my grand-daughter, I will have no other. I absolutely refuse to believe this story. Let these girls prove it if they can."

"Justice must be done, grandpapa. I could not be happy or enjoy my life of luxury as mistress of your house, unless I felt perfectly certain that I had a right to do so."

"You have that right. I give it to you. No one shall take it from you whilst I live. It is not likely that I am going to depose you, my beautiful darling, for the sake of a pale-faced, fair-haired girl, who chooses to spring up without any proof, and say that she is my son's daughter. Oh no, Sylvia, the thing is impossible!"

"I wish it were, dear. But when one comes to think of it, there is strong evidence in favour of this story. Do you remember, grandpapa, how my father always spoke of his wife as fair; how he mentioned frequently the miniature that his child wore round her neck; and how he mourned that it had been lost, the night the *Cimbria* was wrecked?"

"Yes; but what has that got to do with this story?"

"Much. Dora is fair, and round her neck she wears the miniature of a beautiful fair woman, her mother. The resemblance between Dora and the portrait is striking."

"But Mrs. Neil may have been fair. Because my son's wife was fair, it does not follow that the portrait of any golden-haired woman should be thought to be her likeness. That Dora should wear a miniature of her mother, given to her by her father, is a coincidence, and one that has given Madge apparently a strong, a rather startling proof. But, of course, you had told them about the one lost from your neck on that miserable night, and so, perhaps, suggested the whole story."

"Yes. I have often talked about it to Dora, and examined hers. It is lovely, and was done in England before her mother's marriage, I think. But indeed, grandpapa, that did not make the girls invent this story, I am sure."

"It is hard to say—very hard."

"I cannot believe them capable of doing anything so cruel, merely to torment and annoy us. We have always been kind to them. You have been extraordinarily generous, and they both love you dearly. Dora has been my dearest friend, and I cannot think that she would turn round maliciously and destroy my peace. She believes this story to be true, I am positive, whether it is or not. And you must remember, that she did not tell it to me or to you, but,

believing herself alone with Anne Dane, she charged her with deceiving you, and betraying her trust."

"You argue well, dearest. One would think you wished to prove them right."

"God knows I don't!" she cried, with streaming eyes. "It would be, indeed, a terrible discovery to find that I was only poor Dorothy Neil. I, who was so proud of my position, my name, to become a nobody, a dependant. Oh, grandpapa, grandpapa, I could not bear it!"

"Nor I, my love. Such a discovery would kill me."

After this they both relapsed into silence. Their hearts were too full for words. Sylvia sat on the floor, her head upon her grandfather's knee, weeping bitterly. His hand was laid caressingly on the bright chestnut hair, and his eyes were fixed upon the sorrowing girl with a look of intense sympathy and affection.

The door opened, and a footman entered.

"A telegram, Sir Eustace."

The old man took the envelope from the salver, and laid it beside him on the table.

"Is there no answer, Sir Eustace?"

"No; you may go."

John bowed. And as he left the room, he wondered greatly. His master seemed strange, did not even open his telegram. And Miss Atherstone was weeping —he was sure of that. What could it all mean? He must consult his friends. So off he hurried to discuss the matter in the servants' hall.

Meanwhile, Sir Eustace did not look at the telegram,

and seemed to have forgotten its existence. He and Sylvia sat on as before, their heads bent forward in sorrow, their minds full of the one terrible thought.

But presently the girl raised her eyes, heavy with weeping, and, seeing the grief in her grandfather's whole look and bearing, her conscience smote her.

"Were I more cheerful, did I take this trial in a proper spirit, he would not feel it so bitterly," she reflected. "I am selfish in my sorrow, and by my conduct increase his agony. But I must rouse myself, and do what I can to distract his thoughts."

Then she rose to her feet, and, looking at the clock on the mantelpiece, uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"Why, grandpapa, it is time to dress for dinner. I had no idea it was so late. Come, dearest, try and forget this unpleasant business for the present. Treat it as a nightmare. I am determined to do so."

Sir Eustace groaned and shook his head.

"Oh yes, you can. You must. And I declare," she cried, catching sight of the yellow-backed envelope, "here is an unopened telegram. My dear grandpapa, this may be an important message from Anne Dane."

"What, my child, if it were? Let me see." And with trembling fingers he seized the envelope and tore it open.

"No," he said regretfully, "it is not from Anne. But," as his eyes fell upon the signature, "it is from your father, Sylvia — my son George. My poor George, to return at such a moment! To find after

all these years that we have been deceived—that our darling is not— Good heavens! it is too terrible to think of." And, bowing his head upon his hands, he sobbed aloud.

Sylvia did not speak. Her colour went and came. The expressions of her face were varied. She seemed doubtful, saddened by her great trouble, yet pleased to hear of her father's return, anxious to comfort the old man, but fearful lest her words should increase his sorrow.

"Well," he said, looking up, "have you nothing to say, child? Are you not appalled at the thought of your father's disappointment?"

"Grandpapa," she answered gravely, "if your son is my father, there will be no disappointment. And if he is proved to be Dora's, it can make little difference to him."

"Sylvia!" His voice was full of reproach.

"Well, dear, what I say is true. To you, to me, the truth of this story is important. But to George Atherstone it will make no difference, one way or the other. Seventeen years ago he parted from his child, an infant, scarcely able to lisp the word father. That baby has grown up away from him, cared for by others, loved by others. Then what is she to him but a name? What can it matter whether she be dark or fair, whether Dora or I bear that name? Whichever is presented to him, he will take to his heart, and love as his daughter."

"You speak bitterly, Sylvia. Surely my son must

feel more affection than you seem to think for his own child?"

"I did not wish to speak bitterly, grandpapa, but only to make you see things in their proper light," she said gently. "When does he come home?"

"The day after to-morrow. He arrived in London this morning, just in time to find us gone. He will travel down here on Wednesday."

"Very well. We shall be ready to receive him and welcome him. And now, grandpapa, I have made up my mind as to what is to happen. My father, your son, shall decide my fate. He shall declare which is his child, Dora or I."

"But, my darling, think. He has not seen you for seventeen years, not even your photograph. All were lost—strangely lost. So how can he decide?"

"Easily. If the miniature that Dora wears is the portrait of his wife, he will recognise it. If it is not, our doubts shall be set at rest for ever. For Dora has always told me it was the likeness of her mother."

"Your plan seems to me a little wild, a little vague, dearest. However, I suppose I must submit to your will. But, remember, whatever turns up, you are always Sylvia, my best beloved child. Nothing but death shall separate us two—not even marriage, my pretty pet."

"No, grandpapa," she said, smiling and blushing, "not even marriage. Paul will be the best and most devoted of sons."

"God bless you, darling! And now leave me alone. I have some work to do, that may keep me far into the night."

"But your dinner, grandpapa? Won't you come to dinner?"

"No, dearest; I have no appetite. Nor have you, I fancy; dinner would be a farce. Take something light and go to bed."

"Very well, grandpapa. Good-night." He drew her head upon his breast, and held it there for some minutes.

"Good-night, my darling, and do not fret. Whatever happens, our love is strong. So long as we have one another, the rest of the world is of but small value in my eyes."

And then, with a loving kiss, he let her go.

CHAPTER XXVI

SIR EUSTACE IS FORCED TO BELIEVE

When Madge arrived at Summerlands the next evening, she was surprised to learn that, notwithstanding all the precautions that had been taken by her and Dora, the true story of the shipwreck had leaked out. The news filled her with joy. The dream of her life was now certain to be realised. For years she had hoped and planned for the restoration of her adopted sister to her proper position in the world. But lately this seemed impossible. There were so many strong reasons for keeping the true state of affairs a secret. The girl's own actions and wishes had made it necessary to do so. When lo! without intending it, she herself had revealed all; and the burden of proving her right to the name of Atherstone was taken off Madge's shoulders.

To Dora the thought of becoming the rich Miss Atherstone gave little pleasure. She could not free herself from a sense of guilt, in having stolen into Summerlands as a friend, and meanly disturbed the peace and happiness of her kind benefactor.

Sir Eustace she had not seen since the terrible

revelation had been made known to him, and she could not but feel that through it she had lost his affection for ever. This pained her deeply, for she loved the old man, and had hoped to become his grand-daughter in reality as well as in name.

Sylvia proved herself a marvel of goodness. She came to see Dora frequently, tempted her to eat by sending every dainty she could think of, talked brightly of the marked improvement in the girl's health, and the good the air of Summerlands was likely to do her. But to the unhappy scene of the evening before she never alluded. She was kind as ever, taking an affectionate interest in her guest, and providing in every way for her comfort. But, nevertheless, there was a difference, an indescribable something in her manner, that grieved poor sensitive Dora and caused her great sorrow.

Madge did her best to console her, telling her that it was but natural. Sylvia was only human, and could not help feeling such a threatened change in her life intensely.

But Dora refused to be comforted, and Madge soon found it impossible to rouse her drooping spirits.

Late that evening Sir Eustace sent for Madge, and they remained closeted together for some time.

During this interview Dora was restless and excited. She could not lie still upon her sofa, but paced hurriedly up and down her room.

"Well," she cried breathlessly, as Madge returned, "does he hate us? Does he detest my name?"

"No, dear," said Madge soothingly, and drawing the girl down upon the couch beside her. "He is sad—pained. But he is too noble to hate you for what you cannot help."

"Does he believe us, then?"

"No. He refuses to believe my story—says I was driven mad by the terror of the shipwreck, and imagined that you were Sylvia and Sylvia you."

"Such nonsense! But what does he think of Anne Dane's flight?"

"That has shaken his faith a little, I can see. But he will not acknowledge it. He says she was offended by Sylvia's manner, and so on."

"Then what is to be done? We cannot stay here now," said Dora sadly. "And we can no longer live upon Sir Eustace Atherstone's bounty. We must return to our poverty, Madge."

"I think not, darling."

Dora looked at her in amazement. Madge spoke so brightly, her face wore such an expression of happy content, that the girl was filled with wonder.

"I do not understand you," she said, with some irritation. "You used to have spirit, a feeling of pride. But now"—

Madge laughed softly, and kissed the pouting lips.

"My darling, you must not be cross with your poor Madge. And do not blame her till you know all. We—at least you—shall not go back to poverty, but to a life of comfort and luxury with your father."

"My father? Oh, Madge!"

"Yes, darling, with your father. Sir Eustace does not believe our story, does not wish to believe it, poor old man. But he has consented, at Sylvia's suggestion, that your father is to decide the matter. So no wonder I look happy. No wonder I say you shall not return to poverty. He is to reach this to-morrow, and then very soon my great ambition will be achieved, and you, my pet, will be restored to your proper place in the world."

"Yes. But he may not know me."

"Not know you? Of course he will know you. You are little changed, Dora, and the living image of his dead wife."

"Poor Sylvia!" murmured Dora. "I wish my happiness had not to be bought at the terrible price of her suffering."

"Do not fret about her, dearest. She will feel the change at first, of course. But she has a fine, a noble character, and will soon recover from the blow. Sir Eustace loves her tenderly. He is rich, and will treat her in every respect as his adopted daughter."

"If I thought that, I could really feel happy," said Dora, smiling, "and forgive myself for having in an unguarded moment betrayed this secret."

"Dearest, sooner or later this secret must have been told. Lady Ashfield was most anxious to have it announced to the world. No one on earth could have persuaded her to keep it quiet, had her son persisted in wishing to marry you."

"And he would surely have done that," said Dora,

blushing deeply. "He is too true, and loves me too dearly, not to persist."

"Yes, darling, I know. Therefore you need not blame yourself. No matter what you had done or said, this secret was certain to have slipped out. And I am thankful that it has done so now, just as your father comes home."

"But if he should not know me? If he should think Sylvia is his daughter?"

"Then, dearest," said Madge decidedly, "I would believe Sir Eustace's version of the story, and say that the terror of the wreck had turned my brain."

The next morning Madge dressed Dora in a pretty pale blue gown, arranged her golden hair in simple coils round her little head, and wrapped a soft white shawl about her shoulders.

The two girls sat together in Dora's sitting-room, working and reading, and no one but Désirée came to them through the day.

At four o'clock Madge rose up and laid aside her embroidery.

"It is time, darling," she said; and, raising Dora from the sofa, she drew her arm within her own and led her slowly down the broad oak staircase to the library.

Dora trembled in every limb, and looked nervously around as she entered the room. But there was no one there, and she breathed more freely.

"I am glad they have not come yet. Oh, Madge, I feel so frightened, so"—

"My pet, you must be courageous," said Madge, a she made her sit down in a large arm-chair. 'There is nothing to alarm you. It will all go off very quietly."

"I hope so. I hope so." And Dora lay back with a sigh.

Presently the door opened, and Sir Eustace came in with Sylvia leaning on his arm. She was dressed in pure white, a bunch of violets at her breast. She looked very beautiful, tall, erect, and stately, and as Dora looked at her, she felt her heart sink low within her.

"Who," she thought, "could look at us two and not choose her? So, perhaps, after all, this meeting may be a failure for me, and Sylvia will be left as she is. I could almost hope so—only— Sir Eustace!"

He turned as she called him, and looked at her inquiringly. Dora started; she was shocked at the change in him. He was pale and worn, his eyes were sunk in his head, and his mouth was set in stern, harsh lines.

"Forgive me," faltered Dora; "oh, say you forgive me!"

Sylvia stooped and kissed her; then looked up appealingly at Sir Eustace.

"Forgive her, grandpapa," she whispered. "Speak to her kindly. It is not her fault."

"My dear, of course. I understand perfectly," he replied. "I have nothing to forgive." And he turned away abruptly.

Dora sighed heavily, and grasped Madge's hand tightly within her own. Here was a friend who would never desert her, no matter what her fate might be. Madge pressed her lips upon the little thin fingers, and said in a low voice, "Courage."

Sylvia looked at them sadly, and followed Sir Eustace to the other side of the room.

An unpleasant silence fell upon them all, broken only by the ticking of the clock upon the mantelpiece. Sir Eustace had expected his son to arrive at half-past four, but it was now five, and he had not yet appeared. The old man grew impatient. This waiting was terrible. Would he never come?

But suddenly the sound of carriage wheels was heard in the avenue. Sylvia grew pale as marble, and leaned heavily against the bookcase. Dora looked at her longingly, and fell back trembling in her chair.

"This ordeal will soon be at an end, my sweet Sylvia," whispered Sir Eustace, with quivering lips. "In a few moments you will be in your father's arms."

And he tried to walk steadily forward as he heard the hall-door opening to admit his son. But his anxiety was too great, his feeling too intense; and, covering his face with his hands, he sank helpless on the sofa.

Madge alone was cool and self-possessed. She stood by Dora's side, a look of triumphant happiness in her eyes, her cheeks glowing with the flush of certain victory.

The sound of hurrying feet; the opening and shutting of doors; a cheerful voice, loud, clear, and ringing, falls on their ears, and George Atherstone, looking much aged since we last saw him, and somewhat bronzed from his long sea-journey, enters the library and grasps his father by the hand.

"Thank God, I am home safe at last!" he cries heartily. "It is a lifetime since we parted, father. I am glad to see you once more. And my daughter? Shall I know her, I wonder, the little one that I have deserted so long?"

He looks anxiously round the room. He passes, without recognition, beautiful Sylvia, with her rich chestnut hair and dark, lustrous eyes, glances at Madge, and gives a slight start. She puzzles him—reminds him of someone. But it is not her he seeks. At last he sees Dora, white and fragile, looking up at him with a yearning, pleading expression, and in an instant he is by her side.

"My sweet child! My poor deserted bairn!" he sobs, taking her in his arms and kissing her over and over again. "Oh, my Sylvia, how like your mother you are! how like my dear, dear wife!"

"Yes," said the girl softly; "so Madge always told me. And see, I have never parted from this; I have always kept it, father."

And, drawing out the miniature of her dead mother, she held it towards him.

"My darling!" He kissed her again, and gazed at her fondly. "I am glad you have it still, for it is

like her—and you. But I thought it was lost—lost in that terrible wreck?"

"No, no, it was always round my neck."

"Then I must have misunderstood my father's letters," he said, looking puzzled, "for I thought he told me— However, that does not matter now. And you," giving his hand to Madge, "are my dear old friend's eldest daughter, Madge? And this," glancing with admiration at Sylvia, "is, I am sure, the beautiful baby, Dora? Well, my dear, I am more glad than I can say to find that you were not drowned, as was at first supposed. Thank God you too escaped that fearful death!" Then he turned again to his child and examined her closely, critically. He touched the golden hair, lingered admiringly on the deep, pathetic blue eyes, the sweet, tender mouth, and alabaster cheek. But as his gaze wandered over her figure, and he began to realise that she was weak and an invalid, he uttered a faint cry, and looked reproachfully at his father.

"You told me she was tall and strong," he cried in a loud tone of keen disappointment. "You described her as—well, as you might have described Dorothy Neil there. You never hinted that she was small and fragile, a poor delicate little creature. Why did you not prepare me for such a trouble? Why did you deceive me so terribly? My darling is beautiful, but, alas! quite different from the splendid girl you led me to suppose. What was your motive, father? Why have you so cruelly deceived me?"

Sir Eustace stared at his son blankly. Then, opening his lips and waving his hand, he murmured "Sylvia."

And his voice was inaudible, and George knew not what he meant.

"George," he whispered hoarsely, "I"—

Then he staggered forward, uttered a deep groan, and fell heavily to the ground.

"Grandpapa, grandpapa!" cried Sylvia, flinging herself on her knees by his side. "Oh, my poor tender-hearted darling, this cruel shock has killed you!"

But George Atherstone thrust her away, and with the help of the servants carried his father up the stairs, and laid him on the bed in his own room.

"Had I known my return, after all these years would have caused you such a shock, I would have stayed away for ever," he murmured, as he bent tenderly over the unconscious man. "But I never thought such a thing possible—never."

Then, pressing a loving kiss upon the marble brow, he stole away, leaving Sir Eustace to the doctors.

CHAPTER XXVII

SYLVIA GIVES WAY TO DESPAIR

Sir Eustace Atherstone never spoke again.

His heart had been seriously affected for some time, said the great physician who had been his medical attendant for years. The joy at seeing his son again had doubtless been too much for him, and so he had died.

The whole household was plunged in deep grief by this sudden death. For Sir Eustace was beloved by all. He had always been a kind master, not only just, but unusually generous, to all those who served him.

To George Atherstone his death was bitter disappointment, and changed his home-coming from the happy time he had always looked forward to into one of misery and pain. So he wandered disconsolately through the big house, or sat alone in the library trying to read. He had not a single friend from outside to comfort and condole with him, and everyone within the place was absorbed in grief.

His little daughter lay upon a bed of pain, mind and body torn with anguish at the horrible recollec-

tion of that last terrible scene. Madge watched by her bedside night and day; and the other girl was rarely to be seen.

"The other girl,"—thus he called Sylvia, the beautiful idol, so fondly loved and carefully guarded by his dead father. But of this he knew nothing. Not a whisper of such a thing had reached his ears. And he had not the faintest idea that anything but the emotion caused by seeing him had helped to hasten the old man's death. He took his place as master of the house. All orders were given by him; and no one thought of troubling the afflicted girl who had so long acted as mistress of the establishment. The servants did not apply to her, as they feared to disturb her in her grief. He did not consult her, for the simple reason that he looked upon her as a mere visitor, without right or power to direct him.

And yet, as he stole into his father's room from time to time to gaze on that noble countenance, so calm and placid in death, it did strike him as strange that this girl was almost always to be found by the old man's bed. It annoyed him extremely to find her thus taking the place of a loving daughter or an affectionate wife.

The afternoon before the funeral he went upstairs, carrying a cross of pure white flowers to lay upon the dead man's breast. As he entered the room, the sound of someone sobbing fell upon his ear, and then once more he beheld this girl kneeling by the bed.

Her whole attitude was one of despair. Her head was bent, her arms flung forward, and her slight frame was shaken with convulsive weeping.

George Atherstone laid his cross reverently upon his father's breast, then looked wonderingly at the sorrowing girl.

"Miss Neil," he said gently.

She started as though she had been stung; and a cry escaped her lips.

"I am sorry I frightened you," he said. "I thought you heard me enter. But I must request you to come away. The funeral is to-morrow. There are last offices to perform. The men are coming; you must not stay."

She looked at him in a dazed, uncertain manner, then suddenly sprang to her feet, pressed her lips passionately on those of the dead man, and staggered blindly from the room.

Poor Sylvia!—for so we shall still call her, although he now knows she has no right to the name,—turned away from the side of him who had been father, grandfather, and friend; shut out from the sight of him she loved so well. Her heart was like to burst with anguish. On that dreadful evening when he had fallen dead at her feet, she had felt wild with grief at the thought that he was gone; that never more should she hear his voice, or receive his caresses. From that hour her mind had been absorbed in the one unhappy truth—that he was dead, passed away for ever.

But now, as George Atherstone coldly bade her leave her place by her beloved dead, calling her by that name that was henceforth to be her own, she remembered suddenly all the misfortunes that had come upon her.

"He is gone," she wailed, pacing up and down her room in frantic despair. "Gone without a word, leaving me a pauper, dependent upon George Atherstone or Madge. Oh, I cannot bear the thought—I cannot bear the thought! This house that was to have been my own, those grounds, that park, all gone, and I, the once courted and admired heiress, am now poor, helpless Dorothy Neil. But nothing will induce me to be a burden on anyone. I must look for work, go out as a governess, do anything, rather than live in a state of dependence. Oh, my poor Paul, had you been in a better position, had you worked during all those years wasted in folly and idleness, you might have helped me now. But, alas! that is impossible. A penniless wife would be but a clog upon you, prevent you getting on. As the rich Miss Atherstone, I was not allowed to marry you; as Dorothy Neil, without a penny of her own, I must refuse to do so. Oh, grandpapa, grandpapa, why did you leave me? From your hands I'd have taken anything. I'd have been your child, your companion. But now this place, these walls, stifle me. I must go out, and in the fresh air, away from the sight of this dear, dear home, I may think more calmly, make up my mind to something."

It was a pleasant day for a walk. There was the softness of spring in the fresh, sweet air, and as Sylvia passed down the avenue, she saw snowdrops and crocuses lifting their delicate blossoms above the rich brown moss that grew so luxuriantly under the fine old beech trees. Primroses and violets were blooming in all the hedgerows. The woods had a slender tinge of green from their dainty sprouting leaves, and the far-off fields, full of the fast-growing crops, looked fresh and brilliant under the deep blue sky.

"All so peaceful, so beautiful," murmured the girl sadly; "and yet he, the master of all, is gone—never to return. The beauty, the unchanging peace, seems cruel, and fills me with pain."

And she hurried along, anxious to shut out from her sight, if possible, all the varied charms of the lovely landscape.

At last she came on a wide, wild common, and here the view suited her present mood to perfection. The heather, which she had seen in the autumn rich in deep purple hues, was now brown, without leaf or flower. The bracken, then so green and soft, lay withered and dry upon the ground, looking as though it could never rise its head again in life and happiness to heaven.

"It is like my heart," she thought, "crushed and dead, only it may revive with the summer sun, the soft spring rains. My heart, alas! never, never can;" and she shivered as a cold blast of wind came sweeping across the moorland.

She drew her cloak more closely round her, and wandered in amongst the withered heather and dry bracken. She felt utterly dreary and forsaken, and went on aimlessly, heedless of time or distance. The brightness of the day passed off; the sky became a leaden grey, the wind sharp and easterly.

As Sylvia crossed the heath, and came out again upon the road, she stood for a moment in doubt. She had come a long way from Summerlands, and was not sure which turn to take. She glanced anxiously about to see if there was anyone near who could direct her, but not a creature was visible. A grey mist had come down and hid the distance, and she knew not what to do.

Suddenly footsteps were heard approaching, and a young man came towards her along the road. He was walking briskly, his head thrown well back, stepping out triumphantly to Mendelssohn's Wedding March, which he hummed to himself in a rich, clear baritone.

Sylvia's heart gave a great plunge, and she felt herself trembling from head to foot.

"Is it possible—can it be? Paul!"

He looked round; he was bewildered, astonished. It was Sylvia's voice; and yet, he was many miles from Summerlands. How could she be there? The song died upon his lips; he turned wonderingly towards the common.

"How come you to be here, Paul? Why are you not in London?" she asked.

And, as the slim figure came forward through the mist, he knew that his ears had not deceived him, and that it was really Sylvia who had spoken.

"Because—oh, my dearest!—my time of probation is over. I have earned the right to tell you how dearly I love you."

And, catching her hand, he held it tightly clasped within his own.

"Thank God," murmured Sylvia, "I am not without a friend! There is still some one to love me in this sad, sad world."

He gazed at her in surprise and alarm.

"Sylvia," he said reproachfully, "you should not speak thus; you, the adored, the idolised. Oh, my love, if it were not for my strong belief in your affection and truth, I would not dare to offer you my poor heart, my home, so unworthy of you. But you look ill, dearest—what is wrong? Why are you so far from Summerlands? Does Sir Eustace know"—

"He is gone, Paul. My dear, kind grandfather is gone."

"Gone—dead?"

"Yes, dead. He fell suddenly at my feet, and never spoke again."

"Good God! how terrible!"

Paul raised his hat reverently, and drew Sylvia's hand within his arm.

"Terrible indeed!" The girl shivered. "So no wonder I am ill and weary."

"No wonder, dearest. But come home now."

"I have no home."

"Sylvia! Has this death turned your brain? Till we marry, which, thank God, need not be long now, the house which was your grandfather's must be your home. Since your father has not yet returned"—

"I have no father, no grandfather, no home," she cried passionately. "I am a pauper, a nobody. All these years I have been an impostor, deceiving you, the world, everyone. Oh, Paul, why was I born?"

"My own love," he said soothingly, "you were born for much good—to perfect my life, and make me happy, and—and perhaps great. Your love has encouraged me, Sylvia, fired my ambition, filled me with good and noble thoughts. That alone is something to live for. But I do not understand you. Something strange must have happened to make you seem so wild—so distracted."

"Something? Oh, Paul, would that I could wake and find it all a dream—a horrible nightmare! But listen."

And, sinking down upon the heather, she poured forth the whole sad story from beginning to end.

"Well, my darling," he said when she had finished, "I am sorry for your sake, deeply grieved that you should have such a disappointment as this must be; but, after all, what does it matter? You loved Sir Eustace, and spent many happy years in his company; he loved you dearly, devotedly, and you have a right to mourn for him now that he is dead. But this discovery, this secret of your birth, is not worth a sigh.

Mr. Neil was a man of good family; he was upright and honest, though unfortunate in his affairs. His wife was a lady. All this I know for a fact, and you need never be ashamed of being their daughter."

"But, Paul," she cried impatiently, "can you not see the terrible difference this makes in my life? I am now a pauper, without money, without friends."

"My dearest," he answered joyfully, "you are now what I often—selfishly, I admit—wished you to be, that I might win you fearlessly without regret. I am not rich, Sylvia, but I am going on. My picture was accepted at the Academy, and sold before it left my studio. I am full of strength and hope. And if the home I offer you is inferior in many ways to Summerlands, it will be full of love and tender care. Speak, darling—will you be my wife?"

Sylvia raised her head. The look of wild despair had vanished. Her face shone with renewed happiness as her eyes met his, full of trusting love and gratitude.

"Yes, Paul, when you please to marry me."

"My own," he murmured, drawing her to his side, "that shall be as soon as you think fit. I obtained Sir Eustace's consent at our last interview. His portrait was most successful, and he said that if my principal picture were accepted at the Academy, I might come down to Summerlands and ask you to marry me. This makes me very happy now."

"Yes. But oh that he were here to bless our marriage!"

"I wish he were, dearest. But we must not indulge in vain regrets. Come now, we must go on to Summerlands. It is late, and you are very cold."

"He is to be buried to-morrow, Paul," she cried, with a sob. "Let us go together and take a last look at his dear face."

"Yes," said Paul. "Come."

And, drawing her arm within his own, he led her away. They walked on over the dreary moorland side by side. But neither spoke. Both kept silent by the strength of a deep, overpowering emotion.

As they went up the avenue at Summerlands, they met George Atherstone. He stopped, and, looking sadly at Sylvia, said—

"I have heard your story from Madge. I am greatly pained, but trust that you will let me take my father's place, and make your home with my daughter, who loves you very dearly."

Sylvia's eyes were full of tears, and sobs choked her utterance. But she looked at him gratefully, and put her hand in his.

"I was rough—cold, perhaps," he said. "But my ignorance is my excuse. Pray, do as you please. Make my house your home till"—

"Till she becomes my wife," said Paul, stepping forward. "Your father, Sir Eustace, gave his consent to our union some time before his death. He brought me up, educated me, and I loved him very sincerely."

"Are you Paul Vyner?"

"Yes. Your father's adopted son."

"I am glad to see you. He mentioned you frequently in his letters. I hope you will stay here to-night. It is only right that you should assist at my father's funeral to-morrow."

"Only right, certainly. The last act of love I can pay my benefactor. And now, may I see him once more upon earth?"

"Yes. She who loved him so well, and mourns him so truly, will lead you to his side."

Sylvia bowed, and, passing on into the house, led Paul up the broad staircase to the dead man's room.

CHAPTER XXVIII

WEDDING BELLS

But Sylvia had not been left the pauper she supposed. Sir Eustace had loved his darling far too well to leave her dependent upon any human being. Summerlands and a large sum of money in the Funds had been left to his grand-daughter in a will made many years before. But on hearing Madge's story of the wreck, and finding that Anne Dane had taken flight, an awful doubt entered his mind; and he remembered that if he died suddenly, as his doctor had frequently warned him he might do, and this girl were proved not to be his son's child, she would be thrown penniless upon the world. He did not and would not believe that such a thing were possible. But he resolved to ensure the property to her, no matter what should happen. So on that sad evening, after dismissing the girl to rest, he appended a codicil to his will, stating that it was to be hers whether she was Sylvia Atherstone or Dorothy Neil. This was duly witnessed and signed, and Sylvia remained mistress of Summerlands.

This great proof of his watchful love renewed the girl's grief, and for months she was inconsolable.

But as time and the summer sun restored the withered heather and raised the drooping bracken on the moor, so it was with Sylvia's sorrowing heart.

For a year she wore heavy mourning for her beloved dead, and then, as the roses bloomed and the birds sang joyous roulades through the shady woods at Summerlands, she at last listened to Paul's earnest entreaties, and consented to become his wife.

For a long time after Sir Eustace Atherstone's death Dora was very ill. But Madge's tender care and watchful nursing saved her once more, and she came slowly back to life.

As soon as she was well enough to travel, her father wished to hurry her away with him to London. But she implored him to leave her at Summerlands.

"I am so happy here, father. Pray let me stay where I am; London would stifle me."

"But this is not your home. You have no right to live with a stranger."

"A stranger! Sylvia a stranger! Oh, father, how can you say such a thing?"

"Sylvia!—it is absurd to call her so. You are Sylvia, she is Dora."

"I know," she answered, laughing. "But it is impossible to change our names now. I could never call her anything but Sylvia, no matter how much I tried."

"But I really think you and Madge should come to London," he urged. "Whether she is Sylvia or Dora, you have no right to trespass too long on her hospitality."

"Madge will not come. Sylvia is her sister. We, alas! are nothing to her."

"Madge not come," he cried in consternation. "Why, you would be lost without her."

"Yes; and for that reason I must stay where I am. Madge, Sylvia, and I want each other badly. You like to see the world, father—so go, and leave us in our seclusion."

"But you must see the world too, dear, and Madge."

The girl blushed brightly, and smiled as she answered—

"I shall see the world soon, father, when I am a little stronger, with Ashfield."

"Ah, of course; but that is one reason why you should come to London. When you are buried here, that poor fellow never sees you."

"Pardon me," she said, laughing; "that poor fellow, as you call him, has seen me frequently, and he is coming down next week with his mother to stay for a fortnight."

"Indeed? And Paul Vyner?"

"Paul is coming too. He has not been here since Christmas."

"And this is March. Well, it seems to me you will all be very happy and comfortable. No one"—sighing—"wants me, I'm afraid."

"Oh, father! we all want you. Sylvia likes you to be here; and Madge"—

"Does she care?" he asked quickly. "Do you think Madge cares?"

"I am sure she does. You were always a hero in her eyes, ever since that day when you left me on board the *Cimbria*."

"Dear, faithful Madge. What a heart that girl has! How she worked and suffered for you!"

"Yes. I love Madge very dearly."

Sir George Atherstone walked to the window and looked out. Then, turning round he said abruptly—

"Good-bye, my child. I will run up to London to-night, and come back here in a week with Ashfield and Paul Vyner."

Dora clapped her hands.

"That will be charming. We'll all be happy then. That's just what Sylvia would like you to do. And, do you know, we all hope that we may coax her to say when she will marry Paul. Ashfield is growing impatient, and our marriage depends on Sylvia. We must be married on the same day."

"But you are not strong enough."

"By June I might be," she said, smiling and blushing, "if Sylvia would only say yes."

And Sylvia did say "Yes."

So, one glorious day in June, the two girls were married in the beautiful old church at Summerlands. Sir George Atherstone gave them both away; and it would be difficult to say which of the brides he admired most.

"They are both charming in their own way," he said to the Dowager Lady Ashfield, "and they certainly make a pretty contrast."

"Yes; but I have little doubt upon the subject," answered that astute lady. "I always admired golden hair, and there is something altogether winning in your daughter's sweet blue eyes."

"Mrs. Vyner would have made a more striking peeress, however," he said, smiling. "My child is, as you say, winning, but not commanding."

"No; but she is Sir Eustace Atherstone's granddaughter; that is recommendation enough for me. I had resolved our families should be united years ago, so you may fancy how pleased I am to-day."

. . . . . .

Six months later, Lord Ashfield and his bride passed through London, on their way to his place in Cornwall.

Dora—for she was always Dora to her husband—was in radiant health and spirits. Happiness, change of air and scene, had worked wonders, and she now looked the perfection of youth and beauty.

"My dear," she said to Lord Ashfield, the morning after their arrival, "I hope you will not object to leaving me alone for an hour or so; you can go to your club or remain in your smoking-room. But—but Madge is coming, and I want to have her all to myself."

"I am jealous of Madge. I really am, little wife."

"No, you are not. And off you go!" she cried, laughing. "I hear the bell—that is sure to be Madge."

"I am a henpecked husband; there is no doubt about that. But since your will is my law, my fair tyrant, I hasten away."

As Lord Ashfield disappeared out of one door, the other opened, and Madge, smiling and happy, entered the room, and clasped Dora in her arms.

"My darling," she said, holding her away and gazing at her fondly, "how beautiful you have grown, and how strong and straight!"

"Yes," cried Dora; "is it not wonderful? My poor back is now as firm as a rock. I do not require to lie about on sofas, as I used to do."

"Thank God for that! And are you happy, my pet?"

"As happy as the day is long. My husband is the kindest — best. But," blushing and dimpling, "I need not indulge in raptures. You know what he is."

"Yes. I know well."

"And you, my sweet Madge? Are you lonely? Do you not miss your little sister?"

Madge blushed deeply and turned aside her head.

"I miss you, dearest. But I am not lonely."

"I am glad to hear that. Come and sit down, and tell me what you do all day."

Dora seated herself on the sofa, and Madge stood for a moment looking at her with trembling lips and changing colour. Then suddenly she knelt beside her, and, throwing her arms round her waist, said in a low voice—

"In the old days, darling, you used sometimes to call me your little mother. Would you—would you mind very much if you heard I was your mother—at least that"—

Dora looked at her wonderingly. Then, all at once, a light seemed to break in upon her, and before Madge could complete her sentence, she realised what she meant.

"What!" she cried joyfully; "have you—has father?"

"He has," said Sir George, who had slipped in behind his daughter unperceived. "He has won the best, the truest little woman in the world for his wife;" and, raising Madge from the ground, he drew her gently towards him.

"Madge! Papa! I am so glad!" cried Dora, kissing them rapturously. "But why did you get married whilst we were away?"

"My dear," he answered, laughing, "if you choose to stop away for six months, you cannot expect us to await your pleasure. We had intended writing to tell you, but Sylvia advised"—

"Does Sylvia know?"

"Oh yes. We were married from her house."

"From Summerlands?"

"No; from her pretty house in town. Vyner did the father, and gave Madge away."

"Well, I am so glad to see you married. I have hoped you would do so ever since—well, since I knew you, papa. Has any other strange thing happened during my absence?"

"Anne Dane is dead. And before her death she wrote a full confession of the deception she had practised on my poor father. She deeply regretted it, and begged forgiveness."

"Poor creature!" said Dora. "I forgave her long ago."

"Dora, may I come in?" asked Lord Ashfield at the door. "You and Madge have been an age together."

"Yes. You may come in," she answered gaily. "And now, not a word," she whispered to her father. "Let me tell him about your marriage."

But, to her surprise, her husband walked straight up to Madge, and, calling her Lady Atherstone, congratulated her most heartily.

"Now, Ashfield, who told you?" asked Dora indignantly.

"Here are the culprits," he replied. "Scold them, not me."

And, throwing open the door, he laughingly called out, "Come in, Mr. and Mrs. Vyner, and receive a severe punishment for revealing this wonderful secret."

And in another instant, Sylvia, looking radiantly beautiful, entered the room, leaning on her husband's arm.

"This is the happiest moment of my life," she said, with shining eyes, as she glanced from Madge and Dora to the three stalwart husbands. "We have all done exactly what I hoped we should do, and I am most blissfully content."

"Yes, dear, and so am I," cried Madge; "though I confess I never dared hope for the happy fate that is now mine. God has been very good to me."

"And to me," said Dora softly. "But do you know, Sylvia," she added roguishly, "although you are taller, and, perhaps, just a little handsomer, you are not one atom straighter or stronger looking than I am. We are not the striking contrast we used to be."

"No, dearest, except in the colour of our hair and eyes. We are both well and happy. So, thank God, there is no longer the terrible contrast in our lives that there used to be in the days now happily gone by for ever."

THE END

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